

# **DRAMA** *Works*

**Plays Through Practice**

**HEDDA GABLER**

by

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**EXTRACT**



# Extract

## WORKING THROUGH THE PLAY IN A PRACTICAL WAY

*Note: I have chosen to work through the play in this way, not separating exercises that are to do with design, acting or directing. I believe these are organic and so intertwined that to separate them would be idiotic.*

*Where quotes are used, the NHB/ Eyre version comes first in bold, the Methuen edition comes second after a forward slash, then comes the Penguin edition after another forward slash. The Methuen and the Penguin quotations and page numbers are given in italics.*

*I would expect students to document their findings carefully in a practical record notebook to accompany their other notes on the text. They should find this very helpful in preparation for examinations.*

### **ACT ONE.**

Ibsen's style works through hints and innuendos, many of which are picked up later in the play and built upon. It is important therefore to 'read' the play aright, with all mental antennae on the alert, to pick up these clues.

#### **OPENING SET DESCRIPTION.**

**1. Start with the opening description of the set. What impression is made by it? What would first strike the eye? Make a quick five-minute list of these first impressions, focusing on individual words or phrases.**

Here is a check-list of what I would expect them to come up with:

large, well-furnished, tasteful, dark colours, well-off [thick carpets]  
a lot of furniture - big, heavy, dark, crowded  
four areas indicated and visible: large drawing-room in front, smaller furnished room behind, hall visible through folding door, garden visible through French windows  
light - sunshine - curtains back  
flowers everywhere  
portrait of the General.

**2. Discuss the implications of the set. What kind of statement does it make about the characters living there? What mood is set by it? [Don't forget to mention the effect of light - autumnal? - and the mood set by it. Sunshine. Flowers - too many? Claustrophobic scent? trying to bring outdoors in = symbol for curbing freedom, perhaps] Lots of heavy, dark furniture also suggests the curbing of freedom, crowding in on personal space. The brooding presence of the portrait of General Gabler - what will this do? How big, or prominent in another way, should it be to make the point - that Hedda is her father's daughter more than Tesman's wife?**

**3. Now set up the stage or studio space to simulate the setting as far as possible. You may have to use chairs linked together for sofas, desks as tables, more chairs to show the piano and so on. Indicate openings by a bamboo cane across two chairs - and so on. Try first as the script suggests, then if your space is too small, find compromises perhaps in the number of incidental tables and chairs asked for. Make sure there is acting space in the front and that characters can move easily between items, can be seen entering and so on. From this exercise, you may already see how claustrophobic and trapped Hedda might feel in such a place. Perhaps you will also see a need for some raised levels or raking towards the back of the stage, if entrances and the use of the inner room is difficult to view. Make labels in clear big black print to show 'PIANO' ' DOOR TO HALL' etc. All students should make a detailed plan of this and if possible the floor should be marked out so that it is possible to set up in the future.**

This 'working model' of the stage settings should be used at all times when improvising or working with the text. During such work, it may become clear that things need to be moved about - and in that case, this can be done and a sound practical reason given for the placing of an item of furniture in one place rather than another.

*Note: where character names differ slightly between the text versions, I have used the NHB/Methuen. Differences are: NHB/Methuen: George Tesman/ Penguin - Jørgen Tesman; NHB/Methuen: Juliana Tesman [often Miss/ Aunt Juju] / Penguin - Juliane Tesman [often Aunt Julle]  
NHB/Methuen - Eilert Løvborg; Penguin - Ejler Løvborg  
NHB/ Penguin – Berthe; Methuen - Bertha*

## **DIALOGUE BETWEEN MISS TESMAN AND BERTHE [PAGE 11-12 / 1-3 / 264 - 266.]**

### **1. Examine the opening dialogue between Miss Tesman and Bertha.**

**a) What clues have we to Hedda, to prepare us for our first sight of her?** Below each question is a check-list but get responses from the group before using them. Gradually the students will become better at looking for sub-text as well as the more obvious clues.

[from Bertha: difficult; wants 'things just so'; 'mardy'/'particular'; bossy wants her own way - removing chintz covers; Berthe is unhappy and tries a number of ways to persuade Juliana to take her back - sick sister; will never suit an exacting Hedda. From Miss Tesman - description of 'General's daughter suggesting pride in her position in society; shock that Hedda has already changed the covers of the chairs, which presumably Miss Tesman had a hand in putting there. She puts her stamp on the young couple's house [flowers, covers] - early clue to later clashes with Hedda.]

### **b) What clues are there to George's upbringing?**

[looked after by the rather simple Berthe; Miss Tesman wants a continuation of George's childhood through keeping Berthe with him - but also Juliana shows signs of treating the house as an extension of her own - opening doors to let air in, suggests habit of waking George as a boy; early visit suggests will be frequent caller - not leaving them alone. Pride in George implies that he is the centre of her life, spoilt, molly-coddled. The excess of flowers too suggests over-stifling love for George.]

### **c) What clues are there about the marriage itself?**

[Both were surprised by it - so it was an unlikely match. Perhaps Miss Tesman's inability to let George go implies a worry about leaving him exclusively to Hedda's care.]

### **2. Look at the following interchange:**

**from MISS TESMAN** I know, dear, but there's no alternative / *We must accept it bravely, Bertha / We must try to be contented, Berthe. ....* **to BERTHE** ... **She can't do for herself at all / She'll never learn the proper way to handle an invalid. / ... She'll never learn to look after a sick person properly. Never!**

**Try acting this in two different speeds : Both in a slow pace, Miss Tesman's tone reflecting patience, as if talking to someone not very bright, Berthe's tone reflecting sulkiness but her sub-text is rebellious. She doesn't want to submit. Miss Tesman's gestures for this might be affectionate, putting an arm round Berthe for instance. Berthe's would be head down, perhaps twisting her apron in front, to show what she's really feeling.**

**Now try at a faster pace. Here Miss Tesman is firm and brisk, Berthe is in a hurry to blurt out her misfortunes and communicate her sub-textual desperation to get back to her old home. Here, the distance between the two will be greater with Berthe perhaps being the one to physically approach Miss Tesman, though falling short of actual touch.**

**Which version works better? Which reveals the sub-text of Berthe's unhappiness with Hedda better?**

This exercise, though brief, will help show the students at this early stage in proceedings how important it is to experiment, not just going for the first or most obvious reading of the text.

**3. Now have the students improvising the scene in their own words, after a thorough re-reading of the text to establish any sub-text.**

**They will need to set chairs to establish furniture in the way decided earlier and work within that geography.**

**Emphasise Miss Tesman's positivity and breeziness; her rather sentimentalised pride in George; her organising ability - this is a woman who is used to running a household and takes pleasure in it; she does not see that she is encroaching on another's territory.**

**Emphasise Berthe's 'simplicity' - though be careful not to make a caricature of it - and her dislike of her situation and of Hedda. She might have an accent; Eyre's use of the word 'mardy' suggests one from the North.**

Having watched some of these, record the gestures used, voice-tones and moves that communicate the characters most effectively. Each student should do this, adding to their practical record of the play.

*Note: Having said this here, about the keeping of records and about working in an approximation of the set, even with improvisations, I am not going to say it any more, at risk of being tedious! But both should be done throughout.*

## **FIRST INTRODUCTION OF GEORGE TESMAN [ bottom of PAGE 12/ Page 4 / 266.]**

**1. Read carefully Ibsen's description of George Tesman. It suggests an open, disarming uncomplicated character. It is clear that he has had an easy journey through life, has been looked after and feels at ease with himself and the world. Try a couple of students making an entrance as him and then spotting his aunt, his face lighting up with pleasure.**

The next section establishes a number of facts and hints of what is to come but has little subtext to work through. Facts are: that a number of people met them from the boat, including Judge Brack who is first mentioned here and thus is shown as quite a close friend and neighbour.

That George Tesman and his Aunt are easy together and close. Worth noting, that Miss Tesman says that his behaviour [undoing her bonnet for her] is just as if he were still at home with them.

Miss Tesman has bought a hat so as not to let stylish Hedda be ashamed of being seen with her. It is clear that Miss Tesman expects to be often in Hedda's company - going for walks together.

George has done a lot of research on the honeymoon - a further hint that the honeymoon was not entirely devoted to love-making and the young couple spending time together. This is confirmed by Hedda later.

Hedda had many admirers before her marriage. This confirms that George as a rank outsider was not expected to carry off the prize. Typical of him though, he feels pride in this fact but no particular surprise himself. However, a question is set up in our minds through these hints. Why did beautiful stylish popular Hedda marry George, who anyone can see is a nice enough fellow but not handsome, dashing or lively?

**2. Look at the dialogue between George and his Aunt from: MISS TESMAN 'Do you have any news?' Page 14 / 'But tell me, George - haven't you any - any extra little piece of news to give me?' [Page 6] / 'But look here, Jørgen, haven't you anything ... anything, well, special to tell me?' [Page 268] to MISS TESMAN 'Of course, George, of course for your library.' Page 15 / 'Yes, yes, dear boy. I was thinking of your books.' [Page 7] / 'Of course, my dear boy. It was the library I was thinking of. [Page 270.]**

This is a gently comic section, as Miss Tesman tries to find out whether Hedda is pregnant and George is too wrapped up in his academia even to realise what she's saying. At last,

Miss Tesman has to give up, with a sigh, realising, with loving indulgence, how unaware George is.

**To acquaint themselves with the scene, have the students improvising in their own words first. Just stick to the general idea: an over-protective mother tries to find out details of the honeymoon from her son, without actually asking outright whether there's a baby on the way. The son doesn't understand at all what she is on about! Though this exercise is a modernisation, it will remind the students of two things: Aunt Juliana is as close as a mother to George and it is a comical scene. Playing it themselves, should reveal the comedy and will help them understand the facial expressions, body language, voice tones and the comic timing needed from the two characters.**

**As always, record the best of these for voice, gestures, and moves and translate them to the equivalent lines in the dialogue.**

The rest of the dialogue, up to Hedda's first entrance, mentions a couple of important facts and introduces the key character of Eilert Loevborg.

The facts are: that Hedda 'had' to have this house, she had set her heart on it [as she 'had' to have that long expensive honeymoon.] Judge Brack made all the arrangements - a useful friend to the family.

That Miss Tesman has risked her own small income to help afford the house, proving further her desire to do anything for the 'orphan' boy she has brought up.

There is a hint that George could have financial difficulties ahead. It is obvious already that he is an unworldly man. Now it is made clear that he has already spent up to the hilt and is counting on getting his professorship to keep up paying for their new lifestyle.

Further alarm bells ring when Miss Tesman first mentions Eilert as **'that man who was your rival'** / *'the man who was your most dangerous rival.'*, *'the person who was most dangerous to you.'* and adds that he has just brought out a book. Though she dismisses the book, saying it can't be as good as George's own forthcoming work, the subject matter of George's book seems hardly inspiring, and even Miss Tesman, seeing George through rose-tinted spectacles as she does, has to admit **'You're not my brother's son for nothing'** / *'Making notes; filing and indexing; you've always been wonderful at that.'*, *'Arranging and collecting - that's what you're so good at.'* This does not sound promising; George is clearly an academic of the most humdrum nature. [Hear Eyre focuses on Miss Tesman sounding perhaps admiring, whereas the other two versions underline George's humdrum qualities.]

We hear that Eilert is out of the running as a rival for George in the academic world because he is **'lying in the dirt now'** / *'has had the mightiest fall. And now he's lying there in the pit he dug for himself, poor misguided creature.'*, *'gone down before you....And there he lies now, on the bed he made for himself, the poor misguided creature.'*

The introduction of Eilert in this way, coupled with George's startled reaction to news of his book, arouses our interest and sows seeds for the rest of the play.

**3. Look at the five speeches which start with the one quoted above, about Eilert being out of the running and continue with George's 'Have you heard...' Up to Miss Tesman's 'I can't think it can be up to much' / 'So they say. I don't imagine it can be of any value, do you?', 'Yes, so they say. I shouldn't think there can be much in it, would you?'**

**Reproduce this short dialogue, observing the following notes.**

**Miss Tesman is dismissive of Eilert and solidly supportive of George. Try to discover the tone of Tesman's responses. How alarmed is he? Is he so alarmed that there is quite a pause before Miss Tesman dismisses the whole thing lightly - and comfortingly - with her 'I can't think it can be up to much' / 'So they say...'? Try it out for yourselves.**

## FIRST SIGHT OF HEDDA [PAGE 17/ 10, 272.]

1. The first few lines after Hedda's entrance completely change the mood of the Act. Try different ways of entering and saying the first greeting to Miss Tesman:

- a) haughty, treating Miss Tesman as if she were an inferior being
- b) languid; more subtly patronising
- c) as if surprised by her being there and somewhat irritated

Which works best?

2. Hedda then proceeds to rattle both her husband's and his aunt's cages, causing them to be flustered and bemused in turns. She clearly wants to break up their cosy little twosome and, keeping - just- within the bounds of social politeness - she manages to show Miss Tesman who is boss in this house.

This way of behaving will cause a change of pace in the action, particularly in the character of Miss Tesman, who becomes flustered and anxious, though regains some ground when she is sure that Hedda is pregnant, as she had hoped. Here it is Hedda's turn to be flustered.

Try improvising this as a threesome. Stick to certain facts: Hedda, without actually insulting Miss Tesman, is nevertheless as insulting as she can be: Remember Miss Tesman has brought the flowers [too many - though not all have been from her], has arrived too early in the morning, has brought round the old slippers, has opened the glass door to the garden, has bought a new hat and parasol to impress Hedda. Here is lots of ammunition for catty Hedda - and she uses it all. Try improvising it, with George's bemused shock - he doesn't know what's going on - and Miss Tesman's rout until - just as she is about to exit in a huff, George causes a turn-around.

Seeking to please Aunt Juju, he comments on how 'well' Hedda is looking. Turning Miss Tesman realises Hedda's pregnancy, which she has tried to disguise with a loose dress. This gives her now the upper hand. George of course still has no idea - he doesn't realise Hedda is pregnant at all!

Try to concentrate on this scene as one with a comic reversal in which the only characters that really matter are the two women - first one 'winning' then the other.

3. After Miss Tesman's exit, there is a brief moment when Hedda is entirely alone. [top of Page 20 / P14 / top of P 276.] This is a revealing moment. Have a shot at it.

Try as a solo following the moves first of all just as written. What is the effect? Now try with different emotional subtexts: irritation; fury; feeling trapped and frustrated; feeling trapped and desperate; as if laughing at herself and her situation.

Whatever emotion you decide is best, justify it, and follow through to Tesman's entry and her first line after this about the autumn leaves. Try to make a through-line of thought from the emotional release to mastering herself again. This will colour the tone of that line. Is the line a comment on herself and her future as she sees it?

4. Examine the mood Hedda is in up to the mention of Mrs Elvsted. The mood needs to come directly from the musing on the autumn leaves. In control again, Hedda tries to be nice to Tesman about his Aunt but, when Tesman eagerly responds and attempts to draw her into their cosy 'family', Hedda recoils. There is only so far that she is prepared to go.

Why is Tesman 'downcast' / 'subdued.'? The Eyre version doesn't have this direction, which comes in the other two texts before the line TESMAN: 'Yes. We could.', as a response to Hedda's grand ideas for a second piano and other implied changes to his home.

This kind of moment can be very telling and shows a lot about their relationship: the unease that Tesman feels about Hedda; her cool disassociation,

her distance from him and his.

Using objects such as chairs, try to show the relationship between the two people line by line. The relationship is shown by the distance between the chairs. e.g. when Hedda melts enough to ask that he should invite his aunt over, Tesman's chair would be moved rapidly towards Hedda. But when she says she cannot call her by her pet name, cannot 'speak affectionately' to her, then Tesman's 'chair' might drop back a bit and Hedda's 'chair' might distance herself rapidly, culminating in her going up to the doorway to the inner room, as she juggles positions in her head for the piano.

Using chairs as people in this way, whilst saying the lines, gets you to think the distances between people on stage to emphasise relationships and also helps you think like a director for a scene.

Having used the chairs, try it with actual people. Does the 'lesson of the chairs' help?

## **MRS ELVSTED - INTRODUCTION AND FIRST ENTRANCE [PAGE 22 / 15 / 277.]**

1. As always, we are prepared for Mrs Elvsted by a number of facts that are quickly dropped into the dialogue between husband and wife. These facts are:  
that Mrs Elvsted is married and lives in the middle of nowhere.  
That Hedda used to be at school with her but didn't know her well, even in those days.  
That Mrs Elvsted used to be an old flame of George's.  
That Eilert Loevborg also lives in the same area as Mrs Elvsted.

These facts prepare the ground for a lot - even hinting at what may happen after Hedda's death at the end of the play. George's pleasure at hearing her name, though there is no suggestion of more than that at the moment, is the first seed of what might be a comfortable basis for a relationship in the future.

Add to the facts Hedda's flash of bitchiness and the audience will be thoroughly aroused to interest.

**Have a go at contrasting the flash of nastiness [which spills over into the comment about being George's 'old flame'] with Hedda's thoughtful 'Why would she come to see us?'/ 'Strange she should call.' / 'Odd, that she should call on us.' What is the subtext here?**

2. Look at the next section - a longish one, which is divided roughly into two parts. The first part is up to Tesman's exit to write a letter inviting Loevborg to visit, so that he can keep a kindly eye on him, as requested by Mrs Elvsted. This is because both are academics in the same field and they know each other. Mrs Elvsted cannot think of anyone else to ask for help.

We find out that Loevborg has been acting as a tutor to Mrs Elvsted's step-children and, by the by, that he has been sober for two years and has written a new book in that time. Now Mrs Elvsted is worried that, with money in his pocket and the success of completion of his book lifting his spirits, back in the city where he fell into bad habits previously, he will disgrace himself again. We get a sense of the fragility of his sobriety and Mrs Elvsted's concern seems a little more than would be expected from a married woman. Contrast the subject-matter of Loevborg's book - its large scope - with George's proposed history of domestic trivialities. This also gives a clue to the 'genius' of Loevborg. But it is a genius which needs tender nurturing, and that is what Mrs Elvsted has supplied. Never said, but clear from the subtext, is Mrs Elvsted's love for Eilert and pride in his work.

Hedda picks up on this undercurrent, though of course George is oblivious to it. She is anxious to get rid of George on any pretext so that she can get to the bottom of