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A Selfish Sacrifice

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Akinyele Bobagunwa (Akin), his wife Akumma Obinna Bobagunwa (Aku) and their three children are living in New York City in a town house in the East 90s. This posh arrangement is the result of Akin's appointment as Ambassador from Nigeria to the United Nations and Aku couldn't be more delighted with these circumstances. Aku is childishly innocent, protected from responsibility and all worldly affairs, first by her father and now by her husband. When she expresses her joy to her college friend Ijeudo Chidike (Ije), Aku is reminded of a time when her life was bitter, impoverished and she was forced to take desperate measures. Those "desperate measures" included a shady businessman, Obadele Rhinehart, who is now on her husband's staff in the United Nations mission.

Based on Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the play has been adapted to a new setting and a new century with strong African influences, but still carries the same emotional impact as its predecessor.

IJE: Secrets are the poison of bad marriages. If you don't open the door for truth, it will someday smash open your door.

—A Selfish Sacrifice

Kim Staunton • Photo by Gary Isaacs



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OyamO

Playwright: A Selfish Sacrifice

OyamO (a.k.a. Charles F. Gordon) is an Associate Professor of Theatre and writer-in-residence at the Univ. of Mich. in Ann Arbor. His plays have been performed in theatres across the country including Yale Repertory Theatre, Manhattan Theatre Club, Negro Ensemble Company, Ensemble Studio Theatre, George Street Playhouse, Arena Stage (three Helen Hayes Award nominations), The Kennedy Center, Goodman Theatre, O'Neil National Playwrights Conference, National Theatre Institute in Montreal, Theatre du Horla in Avignon, France and at numerous American universities. He has received fellowships from the Berrilla Kerr, Guggenheim, Rockefeller and McKnight Foundations, as well as grants from the Ohio and N.Y. State arts councils and three NEA fellowships. He received his MFA in playwriting from the Yale School of Drama and is a member of PEN, Dramatists Guild,

New Dramatists (alumnus), Ensemble Studio Theatre, Writers Guild East, Eugene O'Neill Theater Center and the Black Theatre Network. For HBO he wrote an episode for the *Famous Black American Anthology* and a TV adaptation of *I Am a MAN*. His plays include *Famous Orpheus*, *Boundless Grace*, *Let Me Live* and *The Resurrection of Lady Lester*. He won the 1999 Eric Kocher Playwrights Award for his *The White Black Man* (Mundele Ndombe) at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Playwrights Conference of 1998. He received the 2003 TCG/NEA Playwright-in-Residence grant to write a play *Wisbom* for Madison Repertory Theatre. His musical adaptation of the old Greek tale *A Sorcerer's Apprentice* will be produced at Seattle Children's Theatre in the 2005/06 season. His ten-minute play, *Salome Mueller the Slave*, is a finalist in the 2005 Humana Festival.

Names and Meanings

Akumma Obinna Bobagunwa: Wealth of beauty, the wish of the father.

Ambassador Akinyele Bobagunwa: Valor becomes this house, an advisor to the king's court.

Ijeudo Chidike: Journey in search of peace, that God exists is proven by the things she does.

Obadele Rhinehart: The king arrives at the house.

Nana Nwadialu: the training of a child is a heavy duty.

konkere, akara: bean pottage with farina, bean cake.

Sabbe you fa dey go fa where?: Where are you going?

A Brief Biography of Henrik Ibsen

Henrik Ibsen's ancestors were sea captains and businessmen, while his father was a well-to-do merchant, dealing chiefly in lumber. Ibsen was born in 1828 in Skien, a town in the south of Norway. Three brothers and a sister were born after him, but Henrik was the only member of his family to show intellectual promise. When he was eight years old, his father's business failed and the family retired to a country house. Ibsen bitterly recalled how all their friends, once eager to dine and drink as guests of the affluent merchant, now broke all connections with the Ibsens when they lost their financial standing.

Although the young Ibsen showed talent as a painter, his family was too poor to allow him to study art, nor could they afford to train him for his chosen profession in medicine. When he was 15, his father sent him to Grimstad, a small provincial town south of Skein. Here he became an apothecary's apprentice, the next best thing to medicine. In his first three years at Grimstad, Ibsen lived entirely alone. Too uncommunicative to make friends and too poor to seek entertainments, he read voraciously, particularly poetry and theology. Eventually he became the center of a small circle of young men and began to write poetry.

Learning Latin in order to prepare for the university, Ibsen studied the Roman writer Cicero and became deeply interested in the character of Catiline, the agitator and revolutionary who was eventually assassinated. His first play, a historical drama in verse, was an attempt to explain this elusive character. *Catiline* was published at the private expense of one enthusiastic friend but received no public notice and few copies were sold.

In 1850 Norway experienced a nationalist awakening. The new literary generation, after 400 years of Danish rule (1397-1818), sought to revive the glories of Norwegian history and literature. The medieval times were glorified because the romantic movement was in full

swing throughout Europe. When Ole Bull, the great Norwegian violinist, founded a Norse theatre at Bergen, the project met with enthusiastic approval from all the youthful idealists eager to subvert the influence of Danish culture. Bull hired Henrik as assistant director and resident playwright of the newly named Norwegian National Theatre and sent him on a study tour of theatres in Copenhagen and Dresden.

For some time he lived in the theatre building at Bergen, steeping himself in the problems of stagecraft and drama. During his five years there, 122 new plays were produced; in addition to revivals, including 15 by the French playwright Eugene Scribe, master of the "well-made" play. From these productions the young Ibsen absorbed and discarded much. For the next five years his own first plays were given premieres: *St. John's Night*, (1853); *The Warrior's Barrow*, (1854); *Lady Inger of Onstrat*, (1855); *The Feast at Sohaug*, (1856) and *Olaf Liljenkrans*, (1857). Their plots were drawn from the heroic age of the Norse sagas.

In 1857, Henrik became director of the Norwegian Theatre in Oslo. The next year he published *The Vikings in Helgeland* and married Susannah Thoresen, whom he had met soon after his first dramatic success, *The Feast at Sohaug*. Their only child, Sigurd, was born in 1859. The National Stage, however, met with difficulties and went bankrupt in 1862. Subsequently, Ibsen began to drink and it was only Susannah who sustained him. She remained a tolerant and comforting wife.

In 1862 Ibsen wrote *Love's Comedy* and the next year the historical drama, *The Pretenders*. He was awarded a State Traveling Fellowship to study in Rome and Paris. For the next 27 years he lived mainly in Dresden, Munich and Rome. In 1865, he wrote *Brand* and the year after, *Peer Gynt*, an exuberant fantasy-filled drama. These plays established his reputation throughout Scandinavia and brought him a small annual grant from the Norwegian government.

A Brief **Biography** of **Henrik Ibsen** C O N T I N U E D

In the 1870's came Ibsen's social dramas, conceived during his summers at Gossensass or Amalfi and written mainly in Rome. These included *Pillars of Society*, (1877); *A Doll's House*, (1879); *Ghosts*, (1881); *An Enemy of the People*, (1882). The more psychological studies followed: *The Wild Duck*, (1884); *Rosmersholm*, (1886); *The Lady from the Sea*, (1888); *Hedda Gabler*, (1890).

In the summer of 1891, Ibsen returned to Oslo. Here he wrote his final group of dramas, "the frustration plays": *The Master Builder*, (1892); *Little Eyolf*, (1894); *John Gabriel Borkman*, (1896); *When We Dead Awaken*, (1899). By this time Ibsen was known throughout Europe as a great dramatic innovator. In Norway, he was recognized as the country's greatest playwright and its greatest contributor to world literature.

In 1901, Ibsen suffered a stroke that left him unable to write. On May 23, 1906, he died in his home opposite the Royal Gardens. By then a world figure, Norway gave him a state funeral, attended by the King and several other dignitaries.

Henrik Ibsen wrote with an intense social force, yet his approach was that of an artist, not a reformer. He was interested primarily in people and in the development of character under stress. His unique grasp of dramaturgy, his ability to penetrate and probe the soul of a character profoundly stirred the conscience of an audience. Ibsen gave world drama a new impetus and power and moved the boundary posts of the search for truth.

Notes on **Ibsen's** Title

The translation of the title is controversial. The play achieved fame and notoriety under what became its traditional title, *A Doll's House*. Today a number of scholars, directors and actors prefer the title *A Doll House*, which was first used by Rolf Fjelde in his translation of the play. He believes the traditional title is awkward and a misnomer; the house is not Nora's as the possessive implies. The original title *Et dukkehjem* includes Torvald with Nora, "for the two of them at the play's opening are still posing like the little marzipan bride and groom atop the wedding cake."¹

Nigeria:

A Brief History

**The old mushroom rots,
another springs up but the
mushroom tribe lives on.**

—Akiga, a Nigerian chronicler

The history of the people of Nigeria dates as far back as the Stone Age. Evidence of indigenous peoples has been found in different locations and languages such as Yoruba, Edo and Igbo have been spoken for more than 2,000 years. Quite early these peoples began to migrate and move because of the need to trade, to seek fertile land, to fight hostile neighbors, to intermarry and use diplomacy to foster public relations.

As a result, small kingdoms and city-states developed and were controlled by kings and court officials who made the laws for the people, levied and collected taxes, and arrested and prosecuted public offenders. Tribal rulers used religion and rituals to legitimize their power.

To protect their commercial interests, the British attacked Lagos in 1851 and involved themselves in local politics in order to install a king favorable to them. A system of indirect control, of divide and conquer, was introduced to govern local communities and to ensure that various ethnic units were managed differently. In 1861 the British established a consulate in Lagos which began a long period of colonialism.

The British began a series of protectorates over areas acquired by treaties, the meanings of which were not understood by local chiefs and kings. By 1914, Britain had protectorates in both the south and north, which were merged to create modern Nigeria, under the control of a governor based in Lagos. The primary interest of Britain was to exploit the Nigerian economy

by tapping the resources of cocoa, peanuts, rubber and cotton. To develop this economy, the British had to build railways and roads to move goods to port. Thus, “a new society, defined by the impact of the West, was born.”¹

With political domination, the British also brought aspects of cultural domination. Believing their culture was superior to any other, they abolished elements of Nigerian culture they found objectionable such as polygamy, trial by ordeal and certain kinds of rituals. But they did bring new ideas and institutions such as Christianity and Western formal education which had the effect of spreading the English language.

Many Nigerians, however, repudiated the strict control exerted by the British and their efforts gave rise to a militant nationalism. Demands for reform came in the form of books, essays and pamphlets, but a serious radical movement became reality in the 1940s when World War II triggered demands for self-government. The British responded by granting concessions that included provisions for more educational and social amenities and constitutional reform. After a series of constitutions and conflicts, Nigeria became independent on October 1, 1960 with a federal constitution and a parliamentary system based on that of the United Kingdom.

During its first ten years as a republic, Nigeria was torn by the politics of regionalism. The Hausa/Fulani of the North, the Yoruba of the West and the Igbo of the East were bitter rivals and all wanted to control the federal government. One outcome of the political crisis was the reorganization of the big regions into twelve states and the centralization of power in the federal government. The Second Republic, formed in 1979, discarded the British-type constitution for an American-style presidential model. Five political parties dominated the scene, with

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the NPN (National Party of Nigeria) being the strongest, but an economic decline of the 1980s led to violence and public protest. After massive electoral fraud in 1983, the army aborted the Second Republic and put the military in power.

Nigeria entered the worst years of its modern history under the regimes of three military leaders. The first of these was Muhammed Buhari (1983-1985) whose ruling style was abrasive, high-handed and repugnant to the populace. He also persecuted innocent people in his “War Against Indiscipline.” He was followed by Ibrahim Babangida, who loved power and excesses so much that he wanted to stay as ruler forever. He used corruption as a management tool; his era witnessed social decadence, economic decline, the collapse of the middle class and a severe political crisis. After Babangida’s overthrow, General Sanni Abacha came to power. Abacha—an unseen force in the play—was the most authoritarian ruler the country ever had. He killed and incarcerated many of his

opposition, took money from the Central Bank and privatized public property.

The sudden death (or murder) of Abacha in 1998 created the opportunity for a fresh start. In 1999 Obasanjo became president, but the country is still very fragile. There is an injured economy, religious tensions and protests in the oil-producing area of the Niger Delta where many are angry with the government and oil companies for damaging the environment. But “Nigeria has all the advantages necessary to become a great nation and regional power. Its natural and human resources are enormous; its intellectuals are enterprising; its population is large, vibrant and growing... It has been successful in the creation of new cultures and the preservation of old ones.”²²

Nigeria: Religion, Customs and Culture

“I was thoroughly surrounded and immersed in aspects of the Yoruba culture. Even the Christians understood that they had to come to terms with what they called ‘pagan’ cultures.”

—Wole Soyinka, playwright and Noble Prize Winner, 1986. From an interview, “Writing, Theatre Arts, and Political Activism,” April 16, 1998

The Nigerian people still cling to traditional beliefs, but the main religions are Islam and Christianity. Both sects are very aggressive in their conversion efforts and have taken advantage of indigenous religious beliefs. Both have capitalized on change to convert and shape the people’s worldview, and both have taken advantage of changes in trade, education and politics by offering reasons for the changes. Nigerian traditional beliefs, Islam and Christianity also emphasize that people are expected to be community oriented and help other members in need. In addition, there is respect for age and for religious and/or secular authorities.

Indigenous religions are innumerable in Nigeria and they are based on essential assumptions including belief in many gods, ancestor worship, powerful witches, cults and secret societies. Among the best known of these native religions is the Yoruba (Akin’s tribal religion) who believe in the god

Odudwua. Below him is a pantheon of gods and goddesses called the *orisa* who control everything from thunder to iron. The Yoruba’s hierarchy of spiritual forces is similar to their political one with kings having immense power followed by chiefs, then lineage heads with ordinary people at the bottom. The entire cosmology is united by *Ifa*, a divination system based on the interpretation of verses of the *Odu*, a body of religious, social and philosophical knowledge. These are known by the *babalawo*, an *Ifa* priest, who can foretell the future and resolve problems. It is a *babalawo* to whom Aku turns at the end of Act I.

Aku’s tribal religion is Ibo or Igbo who believe in Chukuru, the Supreme God, and also the power of ancestors. Priests perform a variety of functions, including the administration of *ofoe*, a symbol of oath-making “which strikes fear in the people who believe evil may follow their misdeeds or transgressions.”¹ The Ibo are also known for their oracle system (the *long juju*) which serves as a communication and trading network between the scattered villages.

Gender roles are clearly defined in Nigeria. Women are chattel or property of their husbands and their position “has not dramatically improved since the independence in 1960 or even 1976 when (they) were granted universal suffrage....”² Most marriages are monogamous, but one third of the population believes in polygamy. Islamic laws allow it and the economy encourages it. Large farms, food processing, home duties and village responsibilities demand the efforts of women and children. The social pressure for women to marry is very high and being a second wife carries higher prestige than being single. It is no surprise that divorce is frowned upon.

Nigeria:

Religion, Customs and Culture

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Clothes fulfill the essential need to cover the body, but also the desire to appear good and civilized. A Yoruba saying declares: “Clothes are the glory of the body, but for clothes, many people will look like the monkey, others like the baboon.”³ Dress reflects wealth, culture, environment, socialization, status and the place of Nigeria in the international community. That is why Akin urges Aku to dress in a more Western fashion.

Nigeria has a patrilineal system, so the men have inheritance rights, while the women may receive very little or nothing (as experienced by Ije). The man is expected to supply the necessities for the family; thus, Nigerians regard education as an avenue to high social status and profitable occupations. Unfortunately, those in government service view that as an opportunity to engage in business, make money and promote personal interests. The unlucky Obadele knows this well.

Music and dance are very important to Nigerians. Popular music successfully combines Western and African traditions to create such genres as *juju*, *fuji*, Afro-beat as well as jazz, blues, reggae and hip-hop. At the masquerade Aku dances the *makossa*, which originated in Cameroon. It has a strong bass rhythm and prominent horn section with influences from jazz, Latin, highlife and rumba.

“The arts are, after all, the material expression of a people’s humanity; they can play a more than symbolic role in reconciling, with their violators, a people whose humanity has been so comprehensively denied.”

—Wole Soyinka. *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999

A Feminist Play?

In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen was concerned not only with the prevalence of masculine influence in the law, but with the question of authority in modern society. For Ibsen, faith in authority has a “derivational value.”¹ In the play he presents a devastating portrait of male domination and a picture of a woman’s subservience to an authoritative husband. While Nora’s identity crisis can only be resolved by an equal right to self-expression, “authority as such cannot be annulled, for only through a process of its continuation and through her interaction with it can the identity emerge.”² Ibsen implies that the notions of duty and authority emerge as a result of the structure of society in which marriage is the economic base.

A Doll's House was not written as a vehicle for the actress playing Nora, writes Evert Sprinchorn in his essay “Ibsen and the Actors.” In fact, Ibsen sought a matinee-idol type to play the husband Torvald, although in our times the role has become thankless and tainted. Ibsen had to make Torvald the heavy in order to give Nora a fighting chance of acquiring the audience’s sympathies. The audience of 1879 clearly identified with Torvald; the critics saw Nora as vain, self-centered and determined to have her own way, and Ibsen must have been satisfied.

Katherine M. Rogers feels *A Doll's House* is a feminist play; she teaches it as such in a course on Women in Literature. Ibsen shows us that economic dependence on husbands degrades women and that “work in the home” is not considered work. Torvald’s speeches assume that logic and responsibility pertain to man; that male honor is of great importance while female honor barely exists, and that real or supposed deficiencies in his wife are something to belittle. These factors cause Nora to feed his self-importance, to manipulate and flatter when she wants something, and completely deny her competence and strength. “Men teach women that love is all-important and pretend to believe it themselves, but they soon enough reveal their disbelief when put to the test.”³

Richard Hornby argues that the play is not a feminist piece. Nora shows no interest in social

issues throughout most of the play and, even at the end, is interested only in changing herself, not society.

Another woman in the play, Mrs. Linde, is independent, has struggled and still functions in society. To stress the feminist aspect is to distort the characters. Instead, “the play raises questions about human liberation. The complexity of human relations; the importance of inner, personal transformation as well as outer, social transformation; the true nature of human freedom; the question of what constitutes a valid life—these are what *A Doll's House* is really about.”⁴

In *A Selfish Sacrifice* Aku is trying to adjust to Western society, the climate of New York City, as well as the demands of Obadele. She is aware of Akin’s behavior as the product of his Nigerian and Muslim upbringing and perhaps, his important position at the UN. Yet, he seems unsympathetic to a wife who has had to make many adjustments and accommodations in so short a time. When Aku leaves him, she is fed up with the Nigerian notion that she remain in the background with her children and her trinkets; she has sacrificed so much for Akin and all he can do is put his honor above their marriage. She plans to return to Africa, for reasons she doesn’t explain. But she is college educated, speaks two languages (maybe more), writes articles and is very attractive. Why not opt to stay in New York where opportunities for her kind of skills would be employable and appreciated? That would really prove her competence to Akin. Is Aku a feminist? Probably not. But if she remained in New York, she is likely to become one.

The values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex.

—Virginia Woolf.
A Room of One’s Own, p. 76

Activities

1. What is the relationship between Akumma and Akin?
2. What do Aku's macaroons symbolize?
3. What are the major themes of the play?
4. Why does Aku feel she must die?
5. How does Aku prepare for her death?
6. Why does Aku tell Ije her biggest secret?
7. Why does Aku leave at the end of the play?
8. In what ways is each of the other character's situations similar or different from Aku's situation?
9. At what point does Aku change?
10. Discuss the role of heredity in the play.
11. How does Oba change throughout the play?
13. How does Oba blackmail Aku and why?
14. Where is the turning point in the play?
15. Who was the person that most influenced Aku? Justify your answer.
16. What role did Dr. Armstrong play in the play?
17. What does the title of the play represent?
18. If you could come up with another title for the play what would it be? Explain.
19. If you could come up with another ending for the play how would it be?

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