

## Candidate 2 evidence

### Carrie Cracknell: is her radical feminist reclaiming of female protagonists taking away from the injustices portrayed in the original text?

“Whatever I’m working on, even if it’s a play about men, I still look at that through the goggles of me, which are feminist goggles.”<sup>1</sup> Director Carrie Cracknell is an unapologetic advocate for equality of the sexes and has delved deep into the psyches of iconic, female protagonists both from past and present, written by males designed to paint women as weak, jealous and often hysterical in nature. She has, in a sense, “reclaimed” many of these women including Strindberg’s ‘Miss Julie’, Euripedes’ Medea and Ibsen’s ‘Nora Helmer’. Traditionally these productions have been presented in a way that highlights the struggles and difficulties facing women in their daily lives, both professionally and domestically. Over her directorial career Cracknell has chosen to set her engaging and innovative plays in a varying range of time periods in order to tackle uncomfortable and thought-provoking themes such as the social and domestic roles of women in the family, objectification and patronisation of women, class distinctions and legal restrictions designed to keep females subordinate to their male counterparts. This essay will argue whether, through her feminist perspective, she is artificially layering meaning that is not inherent to the plays and that perhaps a stronger feminist work would be to allow the audiences to perceive the injustice of the characters as originally intended.

Cracknell’s radical shifting point came from an experience she had when she was given a book by Kat Banyard called *The Equality Illusion*. She has credited it for changing her worldview and recognising her stance in society as a British white educated middle class female and how this, in any way, might shape her career for better or worse. The lightbulb moment came to Cracknell while she was reading a chapter that was basically a statistical refutation of equality. It was packed with rape figures and case studies of sexual assault in the theatre and other workplaces as well as daily life. In an interview regarding her play “Blurred Lines” inspired by Banyard’s research she said, “Of course sex is part of our life, but rape is not sex, and non-consensual sex for young women is a massive problem”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A ‘Doll’ Who Pulls Her Own Strings – Alexis Solski <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/theater/carrie-cracknell-adds-a-21st-century-flavor-to-ibsen.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jan/14/carrie-cracknell-blurred-lines-misogyny-show>  
Carrie Cracknell: erasing Blurred Lines- Maddie Costa

The book, as well as changing the young director's approach to her work, it made her more aware of the power of valuing outspokenness in boys and not girls<sup>3</sup> (she has a boy and a girl herself) this has altered her outlook when directing her actors and casting roles.

Ibsen's infamous play "A Doll's House" follows the married life of Nora Helmer in 1870s Norway. She is content with being a "doll" for her husband Torvald, but forges a signature in order to borrow money for his benefit. After he attempts to subdue his wife, she is finally made aware of her status in her little dolls house, which she then leaves. In her 2014 production at the Young Vic Theatre Cracknell made the conscious decision to keep the play in its original time period, due to the fact that Nora's legal constraints would "not make sense"<sup>4</sup> in a modern time period. However, her moral and domestic constraints are somewhat relatable. The intricate roundabout set depicted a suburban 1800s apartment, the architecture echoed the early Scandinavian minimalism of the time as it turned, Nora ran around completing her daily tasks emphasising the idea she is running in circles in her repetitive, monotonous life. Nora is portrayed as naïve and lost, much like the original.

Cracknell said in an interview regarding A Doll's House that she used to describe her directorial style as "political with a small p" but she has now realised that theatre reflects the societal structures we live and work in.<sup>5</sup> Hence, Nora perfectly emulates the idea of being trapped in this domestic "bliss" and there was particular attention drawn to the way Torvald compares her to a "skylark"<sup>6</sup> and different types of birds. This captures the theme of the objectification of women, something that Cracknell dwells on in a lot of her work due to its current spotlight in the media. She carefully draws out Ibsen's obsession with the rights of an individual. Although it cannot be argued Ibsen was a feminist in today's sense there is no doubt that due to the provocative nature of his play Ibsen and Cracknell share similar viewpoints regarding the empowerment and enabling of women to live their own lives

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<sup>3</sup> Digital Theatre- Carrie Cracknell: On Directing

<sup>4</sup> A 'Doll' Who Pulls Her Own Strings- <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/theater/carrie-cracknell-adds-a-21st-century-flavor-to-ibsen.html>

<sup>5</sup> Carrie Cracknell on becoming a political director- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QWljHinouc>

<sup>6</sup> Ibsen, Henrik A Doll's House, Act one.

To emphasise this Nora uses her sexuality and “prettiness” throughout the play appealing to the men in her tarantella and general language and actions, for example whenever Torvalds talks about something she doesn’t like, she will kiss him, controlling the conversation via sex. Sadly, this is because that is the only power Nora believes she holds. Cracknell wanted to highlight this particular aspect of Nora’s character as the reality is that not very much has changed. Yes, there are rules and regulations making sex discrimination illegal in the workplace for example, the 2010 Equality Act, as well as multiple campaigns cracking down on emotional abuse in relationships including the current Scottish government advert depicting the way one partner can control the other through social media and clothing<sup>7</sup> but ultimately women are still judged extremely harshly on their appearance affecting their ability to get jobs. For example in a survey by the Telegraph 49 percent of employers said a woman’s makeup would be a factor in their hiring decision if the woman were applying for a public-facing role with the company.<sup>8</sup>

Nora’s dramatic departure at the end of the play is depicted as her walking down the corridor carrying her bags. The lighting is dark and she appears to be wrapped up in many layers of clothing. Cracknell also addressed this in an interview.<sup>9</sup> Her and her team did extensive research into Norwegian culture and the weather, allowing them to “really feel” how Nora would when she ventured herself into minus temperatures and knee deep snow. This emotional context allowed Cracknell to create in depth character biographies to help the actors really understand their characters in order to “fuel the action” in the play. Cracknell also used improvisation in her rehearsal techniques to add a natural human quality to the interactions on stage.

Any modern director faces the struggle of re-imagining a classic like as there is an argument whether Nora leaving her family so unexpectedly can still incur the same scale of controversy and shock as it did nearly 200 years ago? The answer is still undefined. Ibsen actually based this play off a true story so was influenced by the real world. Cracknell said that he “asked a question of society”<sup>10</sup> through his play and challenged audiences to be shocked by his work which goes to show the power of the art of theatre. I believe she harnesses

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<sup>7</sup> Carrie Cracknell on becoming a political director- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QWliHinouc>

<sup>8</sup> **The Telegraph-** Bosses admit they would discriminate against women not wearing makeup <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/10385501/Bosses-admit-they-would-discriminate-against-women-not-wearing-makeup.html>

<sup>9</sup> Digital Theatre- On Directing: Carrie Cracknell

<sup>10</sup> Digital Theatre- On Directing: Carrie Cracknell

this controversy to highlight issues that are still relevant today. For example, around 90 per cent of single parents are women compared to just 10% being men (gingerbread – a registered single parents charity)<sup>11</sup> showing that a father having sole custody of his children is very uncommon and so although in a modern age, women have the right to leave, it is still not socially acceptable and so still has the power to shock audiences. Cracknell's direction has expertly created a "Nora" that engages modern women as well as men. After watching this version and studying it in detail, I believe that Cracknell has not artificially layered any meaning at all in the case of *The Doll's House*; she has in fact highlighted the injustices of Nora effectively through her mannerisms and nativity, which show her helplessness. Yet she does not disregard the original elements of the play. This could perhaps be because it has remained in its original setting and therefore allowing the audience to focus on the characters and not be distracted by the logistics of the modern era, as I think happens with Cracknell's other adaptations.

The reviews of *Doll's House* are overwhelmingly positive. Particular attention is given to the actress who plays Nora and the directorial decisions made on how she is presented. A review from the Guardian<sup>12</sup> states that she "reacts with reflex excitement to every mention of the word "money", maintains a hopelessly idealistic view of her husband, Torvalds, almost to the last, and seems half in love with easeful death as she dances to a standstill in the famous tarantella." In the performance, Nora claims the stage. Wearing a beautiful red dress, Nora's facial expressions first read enjoyment as she dances for the men. But as the uncomfortable minutes drag on she seems to look in pain and struggling desperately to grasp their attention.

This review focuses on how the play has been reimagined, in this case how Nora's character has developed, provoking different audience responses than Ibsen's version. 'The Stage' article describes the character as "Utterly magnetic, childlike in her telling of little lies, lively, witty, warm and sparkly."<sup>13</sup> Compared to hundreds of years ago, Cracknell has painted Nora in a far more positive light, provoking sympathy for her entrapment in her social bird cage, with her husband as the jailer. This can resonate with modern audiences. However, I believe that these praising reviews stem from the single

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<sup>11</sup> Gingerbread: Single parent's charity <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk>

<sup>12</sup> A Doll's House – review- <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/jul/10/dolls-house-young-vic-review>

<sup>13</sup> A Doll's House review at Young Vic- <https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2012/a-doll-s-house-review-at-young-vic>

fact that she has chosen to maintain the original time frame. Audiences still enjoy being able to watch a play and think "But that's not me." As they see it is set in times past as a way of distancing themselves from the issues involved, they watch the play as a story, and so review it with 5 stars, sometimes disregarding Cracknell's original meaning.

Another female protagonist that has caught Cracknell's attention is Medea which she adapted for the National Theatre in 2012. The familiar story of a jilted lover who murders her ex-husband, Jason's, new wife (the king's daughter) and her own children in a jealous rage. Trying to gain sympathy from the audience for an infanticide committing mother is almost impossible however this seems to have ignited further Cracknell's obsession with women at the end of their rope. Controversially she decided to take a leap in her directorial career and decided to show Medea as a mother who although cares greatly for her children, the post-traumatic stress caused by the actions of her husband allow her emotions to become volatile and she lashes out in a moment of passion and anger. Her isolation of exile also allows her plan to spiral to infanticide as she becomes obsessed with revenge on Jason. The characters' actions are presented with almost logical reasoning as Cracknell attempts to create a somewhat relatable Medea, making her more human. The reclaiming of a notoriously hated woman shows the progression in her directorial career as she takes more risks in terms of tackling increasingly radical feminist ideology, paving the way for her most recent production, **Cracknell and Polly Stenham's National Theatre** adaptation of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* in 2018, which arguably differs the most from the original text.

The play follows the story of a young woman of title, Miss Julie, in a count's estate in Sweden, 1888. She begins an affair with the servant, Jean, the immanent scandal of this eventually drives Miss Julie to suicide. The original presents her as although showing a 'put together' exterior, ultimately unstable, for example she says to Jean at one point "I'd love to see the whole of your sex swimming in a sea of blood just like that"<sup>14</sup> when he murders her beloved canary, showing a sadomasochistic nature and severe hatred for men.

Carrie Cracknell's version however has been reinvented and brought into modern day, rich upper-class London, specifically. Our "Julie" is a troubled young woman and with the patriarch of the house absent, her father, she, like the original, commences an affair with John who is her father's driver. In line with the 2012 Yael Farber adaptation set in South Africa Jean or John in Cracknell's version is black. However, a focus has been placed on the only

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<sup>14</sup> Strindberg, August, *Miss Julie*



other female character, Kristina, the maid and John's fiancé. The audience are able to sympathise with her as she has left home in Brazil to work in the service industry, we see this through a phone call she makes to her family often speaking in her native tongue hence reinforcing that her connection has not been compromised despite the distance. We also see the development of her relationship with John with interactions between them alone are emphasised. As an audience, we are presented with the impression that the love between them is pure and innocent, a sense of normality in the chaotic "party" household. Hence the betrayal is poignant when she catches him and Julie together. This is still a contrast to the original where Kristina receives barely any lines, her very presence adds to Cracknell's "feminist" perspective. The relationship between Kristina and Julie is also a stark contrast to the original. They are far more informal, hugging and sharing casual conversation between two women, in strikingly different situations. Clearly Cracknell has given thought to the role of domestic service in 2018.

Julie is captured as an "overgrown child" damaged and drug fuelled she celebrates her 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday surrounded by everyone, but simultaneously, no one. Julie is isolated by her wealth and her "high and mighty" nature places herself as intellectually above others including John. Whom Julie is shocked to discover can finish a famous philosopher's quote showing that he is well read and reply to her in French. This highlights her ignorance as, being his employer, she should perhaps be aware that he's from the Cote D'Ivoire in Africa, where French is often a first language. This scene is played deliberately as being quite comedic, gaining laughter from the audience which in a way brushes over the serious racial tension that the dialogue covers. Julie has made incorrect assumptions due to his social standing but also his race. As this is set in 2018, that's not on. Cracknell's clearly making a point that we in society can "laugh away" racist and sexist comments, we can sugar coat them and make them easier for both us and the victim to swallow and move on. The turning point in Cracknell's shorter adaptation is after John confesses his love for Julie and they have sex. As with Nora, both women have to, at some point use their sexuality to get what they want. Julie strives for affection and to actually feel something in her pill-dulled, hazy life, where Nora uses it to gain the attention of the males in the play, to distract them from finding out her secret. Soon after the confession the couple plan to run away together, but Julie struggles to leave her life behind. She clings especially to her little bird, which in a way reminds her of herself. Restricted, trapped and singing for entertainment, like Julie and her parties. She refuses to leave without it saying that it would be cruel as no one would look after it. In the original, John then kills the bird with a carving knife. However, true to her nature, Cracknell has shifted the power over to the

female character who, in a screaming match with John, shoves the bird in a blender, a messy death to say the least. This represents the nihilism in the play. Julie's life does not actually mean anything, her family are absent and her friends are for all intents and purposes, fake.

Slowly as the play progresses Julie smears the blood on her hands over her face, perfectly symbolising her decline and loss of control. When she finally confesses to John that she actually has no access to her "wealth", sympathy is provoked. We see John lose interest and although not explicitly stated, see him leave Julie when money is not provided. Heartbroken, depressed and truly, honestly alone, she overdoses. In Strindberg's version Julie is not painted in such a sympathetic light, it is the scandal that drives her to suicide, her own selfish reasons. To uphold her reputation, she disappears to the farmhouse to commit her act, still a crime at the time. Whereas on Cracknell's white Scandinavian style set, Julie pulls on a hoodie and lays on the floor, presumably where she assumes she now belongs. A contrast to earlier in the play where she leaps around on top of the surfaces to show her status above the others. One by one she takes her pills, for once being in complete control of the situation.

It's argued that Cracknell does in fact layer meaning that is not intended with her Julie adaptation. The time shift removes the fundamental reason Strindberg's version works, the injustices perceived by the audience. In his time, a scandal such as Julie's would cost her everything, a chance at marriage, a respectable home, an income, a family, a life. Pre-marital sex and with a servant would mean, had she not killed herself, Julie's loss of inheritance. Leaving her lost in a world, due to her limited education as a woman, she would barely understand. However, things just don't add up in Cracknell's eyes. Julie has just as many educational opportunities, perhaps more as her family could afford private education. The scandal of the affair with John, in reality would not result in the same catastrophic consequences as it would have in the past. Perhaps a Twitter storm and a few posts on social media. Maybe it would last a few months, there would be ridicule and she would be ashamed but she'd be able to wait it out and after a while, get bored, the public would have their fun and move on to their next top juicy story. She'd be able to marry, even John if she really did love him, and go along with her life as she wished. So, in conclusion, does her affair really warrant suicide?

A starkly negative response, Julie didn't quite go down so well with the public or the critics. The dancing scene, meant to show the lack of control Julie has on

her life, is described as “over-choreographed rather than spontaneous.” And the set, “the Grand Canyon. “of spaces. The simple argument is that the story and the time setting simply don’t add up. What the reviews seem to argue is that once a play has been removed from its original setting and brought to a modern era, the events are skewed and the values and injustices become different. Hence, Strindberg’s misogyny, although makes us cringe, is an integral part of his work and highlights the injustices of the era. The modern setting loses intimacy between the characters and the cultural gap between them falls on financial terms. The original horror moments such as the murder of the bird are there, yet the review from the times argues it as being “rationalised by intoxication.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, taking away the shock factor that comes in Strindberg’s version. However, one positive remark stems from the financial times review. It praises the relationship between Julie and Kristina, as it makes the audience slightly uneasy as Julie patronises her own maid saying, “I’m so proud of you” when she brings up her studying ventures. This development adds a “hard-edged joylessness to Carrie Cracknell’s production”<sup>16</sup> and focus on how wealth affects everyone. It creates resentment in Kristina and Jean, frustrated at the “ruling classes” yet also distances Julie from herself and her world, highlighting the loneliness and emptiness inside.

In conclusion, through her directorial career Carrie Cracknell has delved deep into the minds of many female protagonists, looking at their motivations and feelings. She has adapted many original versions and reimagined them for modern audiences, highlighting particularly controversial injustices against women and the struggles they face in relationships and wider life. Although the reviews are mixed, many of them continue to be written by men and so can be discarded to some extent as they could be biased against feminism. She provokes sympathy at some point for all three women, even Medea, by humanising her in a way that shows her distress, even Julie’s plight is recognised and understood. However, I feel that by taking a leap and moving the time-period of her latest piece, the risk is not wholly successful. Nevertheless, the inherent meaning has not been stripped from this play and it has provoked the most relevant dialogue, which I think theatre should always strive to do.

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<sup>15</sup> Julie review – Polly Stenham’s modern take on Strindberg misses the mark- <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jun/08/julie-review-polly-stenham-strindberg-lyttelton-theatre>

<sup>16</sup> Julie review – Polly Stenham’s modern take on Strindberg misses the mark- <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jun/08/julie-review-polly-stenham-strindberg-lyttelton-theatre>



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