

Candidate 2 evidence

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Does the National Theatre portray women successfully in their adaptations of classic feminist plays?

“It was in this violence that a woman mastered her death, a death that was not simply the end of an exemplary life as a spouse”¹.

Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and Lorca's *Yerma* have all been adapted by the National Theatre in recent years, setting them in the 21st century. Traditionally, these plays are examples of complex and realistic female characters defying the men in their lives by taking their own lives at the end of their stories, ending their suffering on their own terms. When the contexts of these stories are changed, however, it raises the question; are these stories truthful portrayals of modern women?

When these stories were written—around the 19th and 20th centuries—feminism was at a pivotal point. In the 1800's, women had limited rights, being unable to own property, vote, or seek higher education². It was in the mid-19th century when women began to fight back against these injustices, leading to the Suffragist group being formed towards the end of the century, and the Suffragettes emerging in 1903³. Art has always been about breaking barriers and facing up to current issues so, with views towards women changing so dramatically, it makes sense that artists of the time would want to feature female characters in their work. And although some aspects of these portrayals could be considered as problematic by 21st century standards—these plays still mark the beginning of the movement to start showcasing female stories in a way that had never been done before.

Since the conception of these stories, however, huge steps have been taken towards equality between men and women. For example, it only became legal for women to divorce their husbands in Britain due to the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1937—and even then, it was required for evidence of adultery or abuse to be provided first⁴, leaving many women to

¹ Loraux, Nicole. *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*

² Maddock, Nicole. *19th Century Feminism*

³ Bates, Kath. *The Start of the Suffrage Movement*

⁴ Oxley, John. *Divorce and Women's Rights: A History*

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believe that death was the only way they would be able to escape from a bad marriage. Nowadays, this is very much not the case. In the current day, suicide is no longer the only option to escape an abusive relationship, solidifying the idea that women are fragile and still reliant on men to survive in society.

Furthermore, the National Theatre is a globally successful company, and therefore has a responsibility to accurately portray our nation to the rest of the world. The choice to adapt these specific plays—if done unsuccessfully—has the potential to paint Britain's view of women—and feminism as a whole—in a bad light. Now that it is so easy to include women in all stages of the creative process, it is particularly disappointing that two out of the three of these plays were directed by men. By choosing a man to tell a woman's story, it is already apparent that the National Theatre isn't particularly passionate about the accuracy of these portrayals. This essay will explore whether the National Theatre has been successful in making these stories relatable to a modern audience without making their central female characters one dimensional and weak.

Julie was the National Theatre's 2018 adaptation of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, which was performed at the Lyttleton in London. It featured Vanessa Kirby as the titular character—Julie—the spoiled daughter of a wealthy businessman. The story follows Julie at her extravagant 33rd birthday party where she ends up getting intimate with her father's chauffeur, Jean, behind his fiancée's back. The story is ultimately about Julie's unstable mental health unravelling over the course of the night, resulting in her suicide at the end of the play. The original play was written in 1888 but adapted by writer Polly Stenham to give the story a modern context. At the time that it was written, Julie was an uncommon character—a young woman who (because of her standing in society) didn't seem affected by the rules and expectations that other women faced. Miss Julie was a character who women could both wish to be, and despise, because she had everything that they didn't.

The issue with all three of these adaptations lies with the new context created when they are reinterpreted by modern directors who decide to set them in the modern world. It's true that *Julie's* themes of mental health or class differences are ones that humans have always related to, and perhaps will continue to relate to for a long time—so it's no surprise that Polly Stenham felt compelled to share them with a modern audience. However, despite

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her desire for the play to relate to modern audiences⁵, just because we face similar issues doesn't mean that the original plot and characters will immediately connect with people in the 21st century when they were written to reflect a society that we left behind us more than one hundred years ago. With this particular version of the play, some of the dynamics between characters have changed.⁶ The characterisation of Jean in *Julie* shows him losing the controlling side that is found in the original text. In Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, Jean is very keen to gain a higher social status, and is more than willing to use Julie in order to get it⁷. Throughout the story he constantly influences and manipulates her, giving her hope of an escape from her life as it is, only to take it away at the last minute. This manipulation comes to a climax when Jean kills Julie's pet canary after she claims she would rather see it die than be entrusted to someone else. In the National Theatre's version of the play, however, it is Julie herself who kills her beloved pet using a blender—a much more deranged and violent method—in a way, placing her own mental state to blame for her own demise⁸. At first glance, this narrative seems to give Julie more control over the end of her life, creating a story that portrays the titular character as a woman who isn't easily manipulated by the men in her life. Looking further into it, however, the modern-day Julie ends up coming across as an entitled young woman who doesn't yet understand how the world works, and who is thrown into a state of mental decline after being rejected for the first time. Because Jean is no longer attempting to control or manipulate her, the plot implies that Julie is fragile enough to consider suicide simply because of the events that night.

Hedda Gabler was written by Henrik Ibsen in the late 19th century, around about the time when the suffrage movement began to emerge. The story follows a pregnant Hedda Tesman—previously known as Hedda Gabler—after returning from a six-month honeymoon with her new husband Jürgen Tesman. The couple are paid a visit by Eilert Lövborg, a past lover of Hedda's, whom Hedda—somewhat successfully—attempts to convince to kill himself. Similarly to Julie, Hedda experiences poor mental health throughout the story as she is unhappy in her relationship, leading to her suicide at the end of the play.

⁵ Interview: *Julie*: Vanessa Kirby, Eric Kofi Abrefa and Thalissa Teixeira: National Theatre at Home (2021) YouTube.

⁶ National Theatre, *Julie* Learning Pack

⁷ Strindberg, August. *Miss Julie*

⁸ Matheou, Demetrios. '*Julie*': *Theatre Review*

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In this new adaptation by Patrick Marber, Ruth Wilson stars as the titular character, in modern dress, leading the audience to believe that the story is set in the current day. Ultimately, the story suffers from the same issue as *Julie*. In making the main character more independent and giving her actions more significance in terms of how the plot unfolds, Marber has subsequently taken the blame of Hedda Gabler's tragic end away from society or a bad situation, and placed it on herself. There are—however—some aspects of the new version which I believe were changed for the better. In Ibsen's play, Hedda Gabler is the daughter of an aristocrat, and used to a life quite different from the one that Tesman provides for her. The reason that the play is named *Hedda Gabler* and not Hedda Tesman is because Ibsen wanted to communicate that Hedda was more her father's daughter than anyone's wife, but, understandably, the National Theatre's version loses this idea a little, not wishing to imply that this 21st century Hedda "belongs to" anyone at all. Through Marber's choice to omit this detail, he played a part in ensuring that the adaptation was successful at portraying realistic modern women, who wish to be recognised as people in their own right, rather than the wives, mothers or daughters of the men in their lives.

However, because of the modern context of Ivo Van Hove's version, much of the impact of Hedda's death is lost. Hedda seems set on the idea that suicide can free one from their societal restrictions and pressures, and sees it as a beautiful thing⁹. When news comes back of Lövborg's death, she is momentarily thrilled; "Eilert Lövborg has himself made up his account with life. He has had the courage to do—the one right thing."¹⁰—until she discovers that the death was not intentional at all, but the result of a drunk Eilert firing the gun by mistake. "Not intentionally... Everything I touch seems to turn into something mean and farcical."¹¹ It is clear here that it's not the concept of death that Hedda finds to be freeing, but the act of dying on one's own terms. After learning the truth about Lövborg's death, Hedda shoots herself in the temple, because she has finally decided that it is the only way of escaping a disappointing and ugly life. In the original play, this decision is an amalgamation of her disgust at Lövborg's ugly demise, her unhappiness in her marriage to Tesman, and most importantly, her frustration with what is expected of her as a woman in society. She is aware that now she is a married woman, she must put her energy into being a good wife,

⁹ R. Trogan, Christopher. *Suicide and Social Freedom: Ibsen's 'Hedda Gabler'*

¹⁰ Ibsen, Henrik. *Hedda Gabler*

¹¹ *Hedda Gabler*

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and very soon, a mother, which she is not entirely pleased about. A scene earlier in the play shows Hedda burning Lövborg's book manuscript while whispering "Your child and Eilert Lövborg's. I am burning—I am burning your child."¹² Hedda feels joy and relief in the act of burning Eilert's (albeit metaphorical) child¹³, suggesting that Hedda Gabler is not handling the prospect of motherhood in a very healthy or positive way.

With this build-up of anger and regret and helplessness, it makes sense for the original Hedda to want to end her own life "beautifully", but the stakes for the modern day Hedda simply aren't as high. It's no longer frowned upon for a woman to live without a man—especially a woman as wealthy as Hedda. There are ways that she could avoid the imminence of her motherhood, and while these methods aren't as widely accepted as they should be, it would hardly be ridiculous to imagine a young woman getting an abortion, no matter how respected her father is. While the reasons for her suicide still exist within the National Theatre's adaptation, they are undermined by the knowledge that there were certainly other options for Hedda to consider before reaching for her pistols.

Yerma—meaning "barren"—is a play about an unnamed woman, 'Her', who is desperately trying, and failing, to have a child with her husband, driven mad by her inability to fulfil what she feels is her sole biological purpose¹⁴. The original play was written by Federico García Lorca and was first performed in 1934, when attitudes to motherhood and conception were obviously very different to now. Simon Stone's version of the play was performed at the Young Vic theatre in 2016, adapting the story to take place in modern-day London. The unnamed woman, or "Her", is a 33-year-old lifestyle blogger, played by Billie Piper, who—despite claiming to hate kids near the beginning of the play—ends up wanting nothing more than to have a child. After undergoing multiple rounds of IVF, her obsession causes her to lose her job, destroys her marriage and eventually kills herself at the end of the play. This story is slightly different from the other two plays, as it takes place over several years allowing us to see a more gradual decline of 'Her's' mental health, but ultimately, the

¹² *Hedda Gabler*

¹³ *Hedda Gabler Rehearsal Diaries*

¹⁴ Lorca, Federico García. *Yerma*

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ending is a result of the overwhelming feeling of failure as a result of a society which bases a woman's worth on her ability to be a wife and mother.

Adding a seemingly throwaway line about "Her" hating kids is a choice that seemingly contradicts everything that she says or does for the next three acts, but in truth it was incredibly successful at relating the character to a modern audience. "Her" is a thirty-three-year-old feminist when the story begins, around the age when many women are told that "their biological clock is ticking" —the fear that their fertility may drop significantly at the age of thirty pressuring them into pregnancy or motherhood when they don't feel ready for it. Unlike 20th century Yerma living in rural Spain, we can no longer take for granted that motherhood will be something that "Her" will experience. By including one additional line, Stone adds a whole other layer of context to the show, making us watch as "Her" destroy her life over something she only wants because society told her she should¹⁵.

The set of Simon Stone's play shows the actors "trapped within a glass box" —a blank canvas—which serves primarily as the couple's London flat, as well as other locations throughout the story.¹⁶ This idea of being visible from all angles adds to the vulnerability "Her" feels when she fails to conceive and creates the sense that everyone in her life is aware of the struggles she is facing¹⁷. In doing so, Stone aims to make the audience feel closed in on the action.¹⁸ Similar to the gossiping villagers in Lorca's *Yerma*, "Her" is surrounded by people peering in on her social life—especially in this age of oversharing on social media. However, this aspect of the play relies on the fact that the idea of a childless woman is so uncommon that it sparks discussion, a fact that is becoming less truthful by the day. It is no longer unheard of for a married couple to adopt, or even live their lives without a child entirely, rendering this element of the storytelling a little redundant. In this way, the National Theatre's production of *Yerma* was unsuccessful at portraying a realistic and relatable female character.

¹⁵ Hemming, Sarah. *Interview: theatre director Simon Stone*

¹⁶ Taylor, Paul, *Theatre Review: Yerma, Young Vic, London*—'Billie Piper gives a performance of devastating emotional force', The Independent

¹⁷ *Yerma – learning guide*

¹⁸ *Designing and Staging Yerma, Park Avenue Armory (2018)* YouTube.

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To conclude, it's obvious that all three of these examples are plays that connect with people and tell important stories about mental health and the impact that our current society has on young women. To stop producing and adapting old stories simply because they do not fit into the views of our current society is by no means a necessity, however, it feels misleading to continue to label these stories as "feminist" plays. Perhaps when they were written they could be classified as such but, after the central female character ends her own life over the consequences of the patriarchy on her, it's unrealistic to call a production "feminist" simply because of a female lead. Ultimately, although these stories could be considered timeless and should continue to be told, they run the risk that the trope of female suicide could begin to feel overused. Whether in the form of an adaptation or an entirely new story, the National Theatre should endeavour to stage a variety of stories focussing women from all walks of life.

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