Next to Nora
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Henrik Ibsen’s classic play A Doll’s House and Brian Yorkey and Tom Kitt’s rock musical Next to Normal were written over a century apart, yet each boldly portrays a woman’s desire to leave her family without berating her decision. The relationship of Natalie, Diana’s daughter, and her classmate Henry parallels the relationship between Mrs. Linde and Krogstad. Each experiences a “journey from estrangement to reconciliation and joy” (Johnston 144), after Krogstad is separated from Mrs. Linde in time and space, and Henry is distanced by Natalie’s built-up guard. The inability of each female to deal with her family is what initially keeps them from love. When Natalie is at complete odds with her mother, her relationship with Henry is only another mechanism to add stress. As much as she cares for him, she is not ready for love. She abuses drugs to help handle her life, inadvertently driving Henry away. Only when Natalie can stop the self harm by for-giving her mother and admitting that “For all those years I’d pray that you’d go away for good, half the time afraid that you really would” (Damiano, “Maybe”), she can open her heart to Henry. While Henry “might be lazy, a loner,
a bit of a stoner” (Chanler-Berat, “Perfect For You”), and Natalie reveals her deep fear that she will end up as crazy as her mother, Henry promises that, “I will be perfect for you... Sometimes life isn’t sane, but crazy I know I can do” (Chanler-Berat, “Hey #3/Perfect for You [Reprise]), and Natalie replies that she, too, is “perfect for you” (Damiano). Similarly, Mrs. Linde left Krogstad for someone who could support her family, yet once she is free of her familial ties she can be with Krogstad, the one who is perfect for her.

Both plays feature a “Song of Forgetting,” represented by Torvald’s wish to forget the ugliness, and never again talk about his wife’s mistake, and by Dan’s wish to fill Diana’s mind with only happiness after electric shocks meant to help with her psychological disorders completely destroy her memory of the last nineteen years. Furthermore, whenever Nora talks about how “wonderful” life is, the repetition of the word “wonderful” is stopped abruptly as “the doorbell rings to bring in one of the agents through whom none of these wonderful things will come about” (Johnston 146-147), either Mrs. Linde or Krogstad. This juxtaposition of appearance versus reality is paralleled in Next to Normal, when, after an incredibly merry tune, “It’s Gonna Be Good,” the cheerfulness is immediately cut off by the revelation that Diana’s son is dead in the painful song “He’s Not Here.”

Both women leave their families because of lack of understanding on the part of their husbands. “By attempting to exclude conflict, guilt, and sorrow from their lives, Torvald and Nora are evading human wholeness for a doll existence. Both need to be shocked into maturity” in this play “about the destruction of an illusory idea of life shared by both husband and wife” (Johnston 143). The same holds true for the relationship between Diana and Dan, masked by lies, pills, psychosis, and secrets.

Both plays exhibit Brian Johnston’s idea of three “seismic convulsions” that eventually shatter the home (Johnston 141). The first one is the objective shock, in Act I of each play, “when Nora is forced to recognize, for the first time, the claims of the public/social world she had frivolously disdained” (Johnston 141) and when Diana is physically shocked by treatment for her delusions. The second is the subjective, inward shock, in Act II of each, when Nora “begins to fathom something of her own nature” (Johnston 141) and when Diana, after completely losing her memory of her children, feels a large, nameless piece of her soul missing. Finally, the final act of each woman leaving her family is performed through the third, metaphysical shock when both Nora’s and Diana’s “whole idea of the world she thought she inhabited and of her own, and others’, identities is shown to be grotesquely false” (Johnston 141). The build-up of these progressive shocks allows the final woman to be a transformation from the original. This stepwise progression makes the final decision believable, in which the newly aware woman finally begins to understand herself, and learn that her sense of self does not involve her present husband or her inadequate parenting.

They exit alone because each is presently unequipped to be a mother and a wife to strangers and “must stand on my own if I’m to make sense of myself and everything around me” (Ibsen 63). Nora leaves, telling Torvald that, “You do not understand me. I have never understood you either” (Ibsen 61), and Diana leaves her husband believing that, “You say you hurt like me... You say that you know... Oh, you don’t know” (Ripley, “I Am the One”). Unfortunately, while Nora is correct, Diana is painfully mistaken in her belief. Her husband knew how she felt all along, but kept his own psychosis and hallucinations of his son Gabriel a secret to protect his true love. When Diana leaves her husband, we see Dan alone with Gabriel crying, “Why didn’t you go with her?” (Spencer, “I Am the One” [Reprise]). While his wife, through all her suicide attempts, always ranted that her husband could never know how she felt, Dan’s life was “just a slower suicide” (Spencer, “I’ve Been”).

While the setting, illusion, and final action of both plays are wildly similar, the role of the children in each is radically different, changing the entire perception by the audience. A Doll’s House was produced before women publically possessed basic human rights. Simply the notion that Nora deceived her husband was preposterous; let alone believing that, “You say you hurt like me... You say that you know... Oh, you don’t know” (Ripley, “I Am the One”). Unfortunately, while Nora is correct, Diana is painfully mistaken in her belief. Her husband knew how she felt all along, but kept his own psychosis and hallucinations of his son Gabriel a secret to protect his true love. When Diana leaves her husband, we see Dan alone with Gabriel crying, “Why didn’t you go with her?” (Spencer, “I Am the One” [Reprise]). While his wife, through all her suicide attempts, always ranted that her husband could never know how she felt, Dan’s life was “just a slower suicide” (Spencer, “I’ve Been”).

The children Natalie and Gabriel each possess a voice that matters immensely.

Gabriel is a mother’s dream, literally. His perfection in appearance and voice serves to mask the evil that
lay beneath. He tells his mother that “I am what you want me to be and I’m your worst fear you’ll find it in me” (Tveit). The physically deceased son and the mentally decayed mother have an almost incestuous relationship that destroys Diana’s mind. He is the son she would have had but never could. He died soon after he was born, and Diana had Natalie to compensate.

This compensation is the genuine product of a twisted yet average middle-class American family. The parents of A Doll’s House intended “to create an attractive home, to raise a family that will go to the ‘right school and university’” (Ibsen 140), yet we never see the implications of this environment. In Next to Normal, this atmosphere creates Natalie’s drive to “get into Yale, so I won’t feel so sick and I won’t look so pale” (Damiano, “Everything Else”). Natalie fails to realize that this sickly determination is founded out of spite and her inability to cope with the present, only furthering her misery.

Diana’s fixation on her son leaves Natalie with no attention from her mother, leading Natalie to cry, “Superboy and the Invisible Girl, everything a kid oughtta be. He’s immortal, forever alive. Then there’s me,” and begging her mother to “please look closely and find her before she fades away” (Damiano, “Superboy and the Invisible Girl”). This lack of caring from her mother causes Natalie’s insecurity and the resulting wall built around her heart for sixteen years.

USA Today raves A Doll’s House is “gut-twisting and gripping” (Ibsen, back cover), and The New York Times claims that “No show on Broadway right now makes as direct a grab for the heart – or wrings it as thoroughly – as Next to Normal does” (Brantley). Both plays are powerful, very human stories that cause the audience to feel. Whether or not we agree with the decision of the women of the plays, we can at least understand the reasons why they chose the future they did. While family dysfunction is accepted as normal, these plays show the danger of living in such a house. A Doll’s House does this by portraying the harm of this life on the wife, Next to Normal by illustrating the harm on the family. Each shows the pain of living a lie and conveys the controversial idea that a woman’s duty, above all else, is to herself.

References