

The Summer in Gossensass  
By Maria Irene Fornes  
Dramaturgy Packet by Kenjiro Lee (NTI-AP, '21)

“I don’t direct with the idea of a style. An example of what I mean is the style that’s come to be known as ‘Chekhovian.’ It’s just a set of manners. When I directed ‘Hedda Gabler,’ I didn’t assume that Hedda is a victim of injustice. She’s not; she’s a little out of her mind. But Ibsen is always staged as the social critic. By the time I was done with the project, I felt as if I had written ‘Hedda Gabler,’ in the same way that when an actress plays her, she says, ‘I am Hedda Gabler.’ ”

-Maria Irene Fornes, 1990<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-04-08-ca-1502-story.html>

### **Production History**

- November 1994: Workshop production at University of Iowa, titled *Ibsen and the Actress*.
- March-April 1998: New York premiere at Judith Anderson Theater, produced by Women's Project Theater.

## Timeline of The Summer in Gossensass

### **Prior to Play-**

- August 6, 1862: Elizabeth Robins is born in Louisville, Kentucky
- September 3, 1888: Despite a successful acting career in America, Robins moves to London following the suicide of her husband George, who was reportedly jealous of her success.
- Sometime in 1890: Robins arranges for her brother Vernon, a medical student, to come study in London.
- Fall 1890: Robins meets fellow American expat actress Marion Lea while rehearsing for Dostoyevski's *Crime and Punishment*. When the production is closed in November due to poor attendance, Robins and Lea form the Robins-Lea Joint Management in order to protest the conditions for actors in for-profit theaters. They originally plan to produce Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*.
- 1891: While trying to get their production off the ground, Robins accepts an offer to play Mrs. Linde in a single matinee revival of *A Doll's House* on January 27.
- *Hedda Gabler* premiered in Munich on January 31, 1891, with Clara Heese as Hedda.

### **Scene 1**

- London, February 1891
- Elizabeth Robins, Marion Lea, and Lady Bell are reading in a London flat. Marion and Elizabeth discuss Ibsen and his thoughts on Norway. They then talk about *Hedda Gabler*, which they have yet to read, but begin to analyze her based on what they know of the character. Robins expresses a fondness to Hedda, whom she finds relatable.
- Lady Bell, and later Vernon, are drawn into the conversation.
- Marion and Lady Bell think Elizabeth should play Hedda in a production.
- Lady Bell reads some reviews of *Hedda Gabler* in the paper, noting the critical responses.
- They speculate Ibsen may have based Hedda on a real woman due to how she is received by the critics, and comment on how a playwright can turn a real person into a character.
- Vernon and Lady Bell leave.

Between scenes: Vernon meets with a friend who informs him he has a copy of the play, but in Norwegian. He also learns it will be published by Edmund Gosse, who does not know Norwegian, and it will not be translated by Archer. He also learns there are already plans for a London production, and Hedda has been cast with an actress named Lily Langtry.

### **Scene 2**

- Vernon comes back, but Marion and Elizabeth are asleep. He writes a note with the news, reads a bit, and goes to sleep.

### **Scene 3**

- David arrives, then leaves. Elizabeth comes in and wakes Vernon up by stumbling on him.
- Vernon informs Elizabeth about the news of the play being published in England. Marion wakes up and Vernon shares the news. He also reveals he learned that a production is already planned, to be produced by McCarthy and starring Lily Langtree.

#### **Scene 4**

- Two days later
- Elizabeth tries to translate Hedda herself, but finds it difficult.
- Marion reveals she snuck into the theater and stole some pages from Gosse's translation.
- With Vernon's help, Marion and Elizabeth act out the first scene between Thea and Hedda. They play with how it should be delivered, and do some tablework on the two characters.

#### **Scene 5**

- Vernon and Maria discuss Gosse and Archer's feud. David, an actor who is familiar with Ibsen's work and notes, comes to visit. They discuss the nature of plays.
- David shows Elizabeth a quote about Ibsen's inspiration for Hedda Gabler, which helps inform their interpretation of the character.
- Vernon arrives with the full translation.

#### **Scene 6**

- Vernon and Lady Bell discuss medicine.

#### **Scene 7**

- April, 1891: Opening night of Elizabeth's production of *Hedda Gabler*. Vernon and David discuss it.

#### **Scene 8-9**

- The performance, plus a German Expressionist piece by Lady Bell and David. The cast performs the final scene of *Hedda Gabler*.

#### **Scene 10**

- March 12, 1928: Elizabeth lectures at the Royal Society of Arts (later published as *Ibsen and the Actress*) about the influence of Ibsen.

#### **Post Play**

- April 20, 1891: Premiere of London production of *Hedda Gabler* at the Vaudeville Theatre, co-directed by Elizabeth Robins and Marion Lea, who played Hedda and Thea respectively.
- US Premiere: March 30, 1898 at the Fifth Avenue Theatre in New York City, starring Robins.

## **Background Information**

*Who is Maria Irene Fornes?*



Maria Irene Fornes (May 14, 1930 - October 30, 2018) was a Cuban-American playwright, director, and teacher notable for her work in the Off-Off-Broadway scene in the 1960s. She is the author of plays such as *Fefu and Her Friends*, *Mud*, and the experimental musical *Promenade*. She was inspired to become a playwright after seeing Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in French, despite never having read a play and not understanding French. She was a finalist for the 1990 Pulitzer Prize for Drama with her play *And What of the Night?*. She has been cited as an inspiration by writers like Tony Kushner, Paula Vogel, Lanford Wilson, Sam Shepard, and Edward Albee.

### *Hedda Gabler*

*Hedda Gabler* is a play by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, which premiered in Munich in 1891. It tells the story of Hedda, the daughter of a general and newly married to Jorgen. Bored with her marriage in her life, the arrival of a figure from her and Jorgen's past offers her a chance to control her own fate. *Hedda Gabler* is considered a masterpiece of literary realism, nineteenth century theatre, and world drama.

### *Fornes and Hedda*

Prior to ever writing a play for the stage, the only play Fornes had read was *Hedda Gabler*. Its influence on her work is obvious, with her borrowing elements and tropes from it throughout her career, including in *Fefu and Her Friends* (which some contemporary reviews have dubbed "*Hedda Gabler* meets

*Bridesmaids*”). Prior to writing *The Summer in Gossensass*, Fornes herself adapted and directed Ibsen’s play for a 1987 production.

### ***The Summer in Gossensass***

*The Summer in Gossensass* is a fictional account of London-based American actresses Elizabeth Robins and Marion Lea’s efforts to stage the first English-language production of *Hedda Gabler*. It is equal parts a dramatization of Robins and Lea’s push for women to manage their own productions, a commentary on *Hedda Gabler* itself, and Fornes’s own meta-commentary on the nature of writing plays based on existing characters. As a later play in Fornes’s body of work, the playwright gives herself permission to poke fun at the nature of playwriting itself and her previous body of work. In the section we will be performing, this is most clearly demonstrated in Lady Bell and Vernon’s extended conversation on pages 57-58. Also look to Vernon’s extended monologue on pages 62-63, where he appears to relate his own playwright’s philosophy of play structure.

The title comes from a line of dialogue in Ibsen’s play, as well as a real event that occurred in Gossensass in 1889, where Ibsen a woman named Emelie Bardach on whom he based the character of Hedda. This same encounter is alleged to have also influenced the writing of *The Master Builder*.

## **The Real History**

Fornes's story of the trouble of getting *Hedda* produced in London, the poor translation by Gosse, and Robins and Lea's incensed reaction to the planned production starring Lily Langry, is drawn directly from information provided by Joanne E. Gates in "[Elizabeth Robins and the 1891 Production of Hedda Gabler](#)," as well as Fornes's own private research using the Elizabeth Robins papers at the Fales Library. It should be noted that Fornes resets the bulk of the action in February, when in fact a number of the background events surrounding *Hedda*, including the publishing dispute and Gosse and Archer's feud, occurred in January. This may have been done so as not to interfere with the historical instance of Elizabeth Robins appearing in *A Doll's House*.

## *The People*

Despite the London setting, all characters in this play with the exception of Lady Bell and possibly David are American.

**Elizabeth Robins** (1862-1952) was an actress, playwright, novelist, and suffragette. After a successful career as an actor in the United States she moved to London, where she quickly befriended members of London's literary and artistic circles like George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and Henry James. With her creative partner Marion Lea, she co-directed and starred in the first English production of *Hedda Gabler*, and they would go on to produce a number of Ibsen's other "New Woman" plays. Following her retirement from acting, she focused her energy on a writing career, often under the pseudonym C.E. Raimond, and became an active supporter of the Women's Suffrage movement.

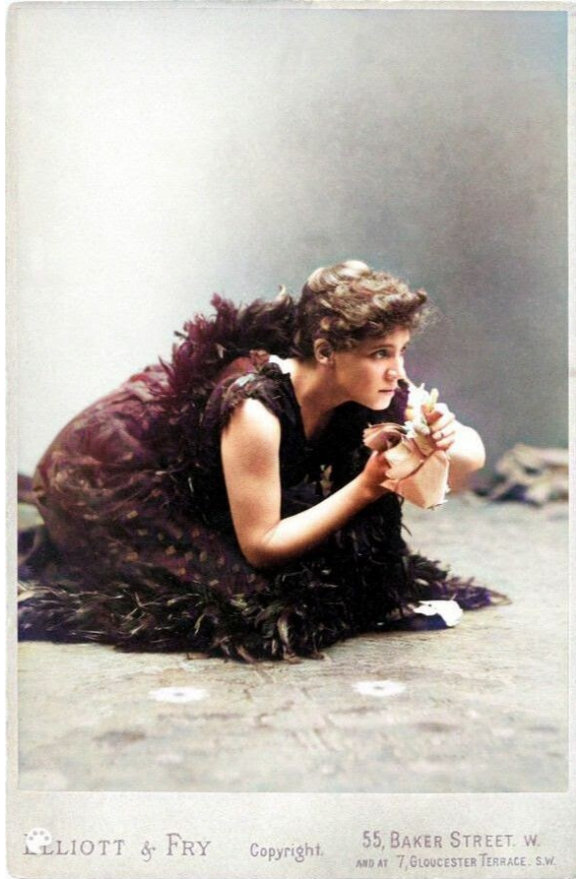
**Marion Lea** (1864-1944) was an American expat actress from Philadelphia working in London since 1884. She was well-regarded as an ingenue of the English stage. She was married to fellow American expat and playwright Langdon Mitchell. Performed on Broadway in 1906, buried in Philadelphia, 5 siblings, two of them had died by the time of the play, one child.

Lady Bell appears to be **Florence Bell**, a British writer and playwright, a close friend of Robins who assisted her on many productions and collaborated with her on the play *Alan's Wife*.

Vernon is **Vernon Robins** (1869 or 1872-1934), who later became the City Chemist for Louisville, Kentucky. Vernon was in London at the time the play takes place to study medicine, at the arrangement of his sister.

David does not seem to have a historical basis, at least one not documented online.





Robins as Hedda burning Lovborg's manuscript.



Robins as Hedda and Lea as Thea.

### **Additional Reading**

- *Hedda Gabler* by Henrik Ibsen
- [Elizabeth Robins and the 1891 Production of \*Hedda Gabler\*](#) by Joanne E. Gates
- “Ibsen and the Actress” by Elizabeth Robins

## Glossary

*For reasons of time and energy, I've only included glossary terms for the sections of the play that will be performed.*

### Scene 1:

- “Ibsen...Norway” (49): This is a real quote by Ibsen.
- Bohemian movement (50): A common term, imported from the French, to describe the non-traditional lifestyles of marginalized and impoverished artists, writers, journalists, musicians, and actors in major European cities.
- Nine Commandments (50-51): These are the real commandments of the Kristiania Bohemian movement in present-day Oslo.
  - “Thou shall hate and despise all peasants such as Bjornson”: Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson was considered among the Four Greats of Norwegian writing, alongside Ibsen. He was known for his poetry and is considered hugely influential on Norwegian public life. He was the first Norwegian poet laureate.
  - Christiania Theatre: The theatre of Kristiania (now Oslo)
- Uroboros (53): An ancient symbol of a serpent or dragon eating its own tail.
- *Hedda Gabler* (54): The correct pronunciation of the original, Norwegian title is “Heh-duh gah-bler” but Robins and her contemporaries are known to have mispronounced it as “*Gabblers*”
- Reviews of *Hedda* (57): These are all actual quotes from the early Norwegian reviews of *Hedda Gabler*.
- Lady Bell on characters based on real people (57): Fornes engages in some meta-commentary on the very play itself – an acknowledgement that Lady Bell, Elizabeth, Marion, and Vernon are all based on real people whom Fornes has turned into characters.
- Vernon’s continued thought (58): Note that Vernon has hypothetically never read *Hedda Gabler*: this is in some respects Fornes herself commentating on Hedda.

### Scene 3

- “A law that allows...” (60): This was a real law.
- Edmund Gosse (61): An English poet, author, and critic. His translation of *Hedda Gabler* was infamously terrible.
- “Archer” (61): William Archer, a Scottish writer and critic, who was responsible for bringing Ibsen to English theater and translated most of the earlier productions. He later became good friends with Robins due to their mutual love of Ibsen. He had been shut out of the planned London premiere due to efforts by the publisher Heinemann. He famously feuded with Gosse on the poor translation.
- “McCarthy” (62): Justin Huntly McCarthy, an Irish author, historian, and nationalist politician.