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### Something Happened and I'm in Love

I left Mabou Mines' *DollHouse* with a reminder that I was once confused by Ralph Waldo Emerson. In "Self-Reliance" Emerson wrote, "My giant goes with me wherever I go." The "giant" is a physical stand-in for the ubiquitous sadness that no traveler is able to run from; this interpretation has always been clear to me. What perplexes me is how I feel suffocated when I see "giant" juxtaposed inside the sentence. The word hurts, as if I've stared so close to a painting that I no longer see the painting, but the weaving of the canvas. "Giant" so overwhelmingly grabs my attention that I lose the grasp of its meaning, even though I know what all of the words add up to. Similarly, Mabou Mines' *DollHouse* barrages me with such a degree of emotion that I find it difficult to remember that, to some extent, I understood the purpose of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. I'm left with dots; I know what order in which to connect them, and I know what image they make, but I'm too weak to draw the lines.

With my frailty defined, I let the production encapsulate me and subvert my expectations as I slumped into submission. In the words of Scott Higgins, I "felt it first," albeit taking notes as I did. Yet, even with a docile mind, I can't help but most vividly remember moments of the production in which I felt distracted from the action. These juxtapositions were ones in which we were physically distanced from the actors, as the camera overlooked the puppet audience members seated faraway in the balconies, with the voices on stage muffled by space. Through these shots we are reminded that, however feverish and absurd it is, this is a play as well as a

film; and that although we are a part of the audience, we are not a part of *that* audience. Unlike us, the puppets in the are collaborators in the action. They often mimic the romantic gestures of the actors, and they hold no opposition towards the hyperbolic performances. In fact, when several of the male audience members fall asleep and yawn during the performance's first act these puppets' actions evidence the monotonous norm and commonplace stage: melodrama! When the male characters come on stage, the women actors display feverish jazz hands—suspenseful music plays. The villainous, Krogstad, later emerges and his circle-diamond spectacles are not something an innocent human could don. Furthermore, the actors cannot stop moving about in lavish and exaggerated movements, a choice that contributes to making *DollHouse* both a display and parody of melodrama extremes.

As a one-step removed audience member to the melodramatic spectacle, I was distant and unattached. The repetition of images and styles led me to notice and remember the tone rather than the substance, which I feel may have been purposeful. The perverse gestures thrown about, including but not limited to the throwing off of Torvald's pants for the sake of heavily implied oral sex, the nonstop drinking done by every character in the play (the pianist included), and the representation of children with masks of death, were all there to constantly pound in the idea that this play, first performed in 1879, is filled with circumstances that morally flounder under contemporary scrutiny. It was during the production's climax that the style found its feet on hot coals, in which the play was constantly on the switch from grandiose production to subtle, minute performances. An opera breaks out at the moment when we expect Nora to leave Torvald. The directorial choice leaves us without stability, and we lean in as close as possible. Sure, the previously reinforced tone may have been lost through the even more dramatic and holistically artistic style of opera, but our attention is grabbed. From that moment on, we venture

forth into the quiet; we find ourselves close in front of Torvald, then Nora, and back and forth as they act out Nora's decision to leave.

The images of their faces are permanent in my mind. When I try to think about the context, I cannot see past Torvald's tears squirming out of his closed eyes; I cannot see past Nora's tired visage falling sullen in its naked freedom. From there, I do not know how to proceed. It seems that the emotion of this quiet discussion is not new. I can see the entirety of Mabou Mines' *DollHouse* as a not-so-subtle representation of why Nora and Torvald's relationship is unhealthy. Even though our attention is decisively sandwiched between two operatic sequences for thematic purposes, the meat of the sandwich, which is the one realistic ("realistic") scene, can be seen as a reiteration of what we expected and can fully understand. Unlike in the play, in this production there is almost no reason to sympathize with the children in *DollHouse*, for they are depicted as demented beings. There seems to be, at least for me, no reason for Nora to stay with Torvald, especially in this demented world that lacks earthly logic. The meaning is set in stone in seconds. The marvel to me is therefore how easily I am able to stay awake through it all. Mabou Mines' *DollHouse* makes you listen because, even if you despise it and find it atrocious, the actors' commendable performances, the film's wonderful cinematography and sense of humor, the subtle and not-so-subtle variances in style, and the constant subversion of expectations keep you in the moment. The torment is unforgettable. I read "Self-Reliance" in 8<sup>th</sup> grade; I do not remember all of the books we read that year, but I still remember that one line though. Its torment is impenetrable.