

A Closer Look

Researched and assembled by Megan Hanks



SUMMARY

The Plot

Arnold Rubek is a celebrated artist who has achieved international fame with his sculpture *The Resurrection*. The model for this sculpture was Irene, who considered it her life's work to serve Rubek as his model, and through revealing herself completely to him, she fell in love. Later, we learn that Rubek's sense of artistic integrity kept him from treating Irene as anything more than his model. Heartbroken at his apparent coldness, she left him.

At the play's opening, many years have passed, and Rubek's own sense of creative power has diminished. He has married Maia, a considerably younger woman, and the two of them have lived abroad in a marriage that has gradually become hollow. Rubek and Maia are staying at a seaside spa in Norway. They meet Ulfheim, a rough bear hunter, who invites Maia to go up into the mountains with him. At once

repulsed and intrigued by him, she agrees and obtains Rubek's permission.

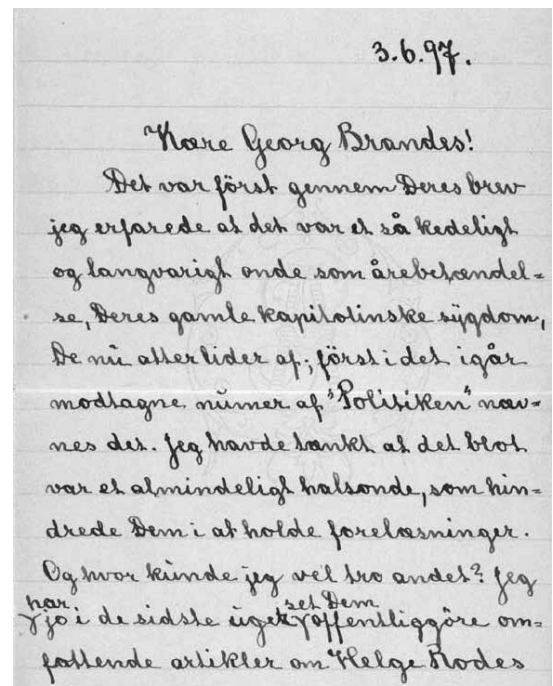
Another guest at the hotel is a mysterious woman dressed in white, who turns out to be Irene, accompanied by a nurse in nun's habit. Irene seems to be gripped by a living death, and in a painful confrontation, she accuses Rubek of having ruined her life and stolen her soul. Rubek knows that Irene alone holds the key to his creativity.

The two agree to go up into the mountains to unite. Near the top they meet Maia and Ulfheim, who have bonded in their own way. A storm blows up, and Maia and Ulfheim trek down the mountain into safety, while Irene and Rubek go on towards the peak in a frenzy of passion, where they are overcome in an avalanche.

The Creation

When We Dead Awaken was the last play Ibsen wrote before he died. He wrote it in Christiania in 1899, and it is thought he planned it in the summer of 1897. In a letter dated June 3rd, 1897, to Georg Brandes, Ibsen wrote:

Can you guess what I am dreaming of and planning and picturing to myself as something so delightful? That's settling down by Øresund, between Copenhagen and Elsinore, at a place with an open view, where I can see all the sea-going yachts coming and going on their long voyages. I can't do that here. Here all the sounds are shut in, in every sense of the word, and every channel to understanding is stopped up. Oh, my dear Brandes, one is not unaffected by living abroad for 27 years in a free and liberating cultural climate. In here, or rather up here beside the fjords, is the country of my birth. But - but - but: where can I find my home country? The sea is what I am most drawn to... Otherwise I go round here



Ibsen's letter to Georg Brandes, June 3, 1897.



on my own, planning some sort of new drama. But I can't see clearly yet what it's going to be.

The letter is interesting not only because it indicates that a new play is being planned, but also because we recognize Ibsen himself in Arnold Rubek as we meet him in the opening scene, both of them feeling homeless in their own country.

After *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896), three years passed, instead of the usual two, before Ibsen published a new play. There were many factors that distracted him in his work with *When We Dead Awaken*. For one, he was unavoidably involved in planning the first two collected editions of his works: the German one, published in nine volumes by the historians of literature Julius Elias and Paul Schlenther in 1898-1903; and the Norwegian one, published by Danish publisher Gyldendal in nine volumes, from 1898 to 1900.

In the spring of 1898, Ibsen celebrated his 70th birthday with large-scale festivities held for him in Christiania, Copenhagen and Stockholm. He made speeches, gave interviews and received frequent visits in Christiania, so he did not get anything down in writing for the new play until the beginning of 1899.

The first date was February 20th, 1899, and the first draft was begun two days later, with the title *The Day of Resurrection*. The work still proceeded slowly, and it was not until the end of July that the first act was completed. The title was changed during the writing of the fair copy, first to *When the Dead Awaken*, and then to the final *When We Dead Awaken*. The fair copy of the manuscript was sent to the publisher the same day as it was completed, November 21st, 1899. ("Facts about *When We Dead Awaken*," Jens-Morten Hanssen.)

The First Staging

Held at the Königliches Hoftheater in Stuttgart, Germany, with the title, *Wenn wir Todten erwachen*, the show ran only three performances between late January and mid-February of 1900.

In a review of the very first production, the *Stuttgart New Tagblatt* newspaper wrote, "The peculiar work is too poor in dramatic life and too overloaded with dark symbolism and philosophical considerations in order to achieve a strong stage effect." The reviewer considered the play to be "more exciting in the reading than in the scenic presentation."

The reviewer goes on to say, "In the first performance, the mood of the moderately numerous spectators rocketed between interest, surprise and boredom. Only the unconditional Ibsen enthusiasts may have left the theater in a satisfactory sense."

Königliches Hoftheater in Stuttgart.
 Viertes Abonnement.
 B 7.
 Freitag, den 26. Januar 1900.
 Zum ersten Male:
Wenn wir Todten erwachen.
 Dramatischer Epilog in drei Akten von Henrik Ibsen.
 Leiter der Aufführung: Hans Meyer.

Personen:
 Direktor Arnold Rubek, Wittener Hugo Eisenreich. Eine reisende Dame
 Frau Wiebe Rubek Olga Doppler. Eine Dienerin Margarethe Hoff.
 Hillem, Geschäftsführer August Richter. Eine reisende Dame
 Der Geheimrat Otto Hoff. Bediente, Bediente und Kinder.
 Der erste Akt spielt in einem Saalbau an der Höhe; der zweite sowie der dritte Akt im Logenbühnen bei einem Salonbau.
 * * * Eine reisende Dame — Lucie Hoff, vom Hof- und Nationaltheater in Mannheim.
 Die größere Partie hat nach dem ersten Akte statt.

Kassenöffnung 7 Uhr. Anfang 7¹/₂ Uhr. Ende 9¹/₂ Uhr.
 Kapellmeister: Hugo Steinrau.

Preise der Plätze:		Preise der Plätze:	
Parquet: Vorst. I 3 Kr. — Pf.	II. Galerie: Loge 3 Kr. — Pf.	Kampffest. 1. Reihe 2 Kr. 40 Pf.	
Vorst. II 2 Kr. 40 Pf.	III. Galerie: Mitte 2 Kr. — Pf.	Kampffest. 2. Reihe 2 Kr. — Pf.	
Stuhlgänge 3 Kr. — Pf.	IV. Galerie: Hinter 1 Kr. 40 Pf.		
I. Galerie: Vorderbühne 3 Kr. — Pf.	Vorplatz 1 Kr. — Pf.		
Ein Sitz bei Vorber. u. Hinterbühne 4 Kr. — Pf.	Logen über ein Sitz von Nr. 11—25 und 26—38 4 Kr. — Pf.		
Ein Sitz von Nr. 1—10 u. 37—46 3 Kr. — Pf.	Ein Sitz von Nr. 1—10 u. 37—46 3 Kr. — Pf.		

Sonntag, den 27. Januar 1900.
 Viertes Abonnement.
 C 8.
Die Journalisten.
 Aufspiel in vier Akten von Gustav Struwig.
 Anfang 7¹/₂ Uhr. — Ende 10¹/₂ Uhr.
 Preise der Plätze: Ein Sitz Vorst. I 3 K. u.

An theatre original playbill.



The dense metaphor and heightened poetic language that this play offers seem to have been difficult for its earliest audiences to grasp, and can still prove to be perplexing for modern theatregoers. But this sense of bewilderment and mystery is exactly what allows *When We Dead Awaken* not only to function as a piece of performance, but to live as piece of poetry-in-motion. There is something magical

about the lack of knowledge—the slow burn—that is extremely theatrical and engaging. Even today, *When We Dead Awaken* is Ibsen's least-produced play, but when it is put up, it sings proudly among his most dedicated and passionate followers. It is extremely heartfelt and fitting that this be the final Ibsen at the Commonwealth, before a reprieve from our annual commitment to the playwright.

ANALYSIS

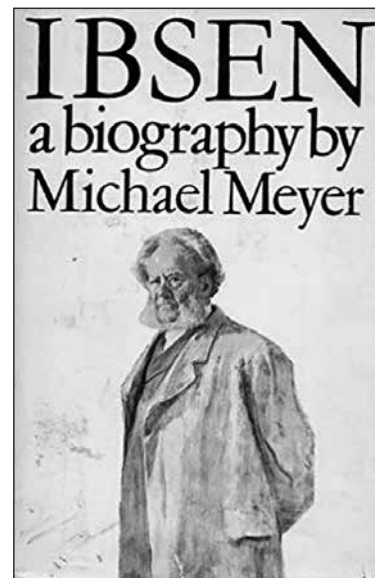
Ibsen's Philosophies Come to an Apex

Ibsen considered *When We Dead Awaken* a conclusion to a series of the plays that preceded it, beginning with *A Doll House*, because only in *When We Dead Awaken* does the radical search for truth, Ibsen's greatest theme, lead to resolution. Scholar Joan Templeton claims that, "In sharp contrast to its ten predecessors, *When We Dead Awaken* concludes in a sure, rapturous conciliation. The commonly noted vertical movement of the drama's three settings—from a sea level spa to a mountain resort to a high mountainside—marks a clear, spiritual ascension. Irene's name means peace, a signification underlined by the play's last line, "Pax vobiscum" (Peace be with you). Ibsen ends his series of dramas of modern life with words of healing and benediction." (Templeton, *Ibsen's Women*)

Ibsen also thought of *When We Dead Awaken* as an epilogue in a larger sense. Replying to a newspaper reporter who asked him if he had subtitled the play "A Dramatic Epilogue" to signal that it was his last play, Ibsen responded, "Whether I write any more is another question, but what I meant by 'Epilogue' in this context was only that the play forms an epilogue with the series of plays that begin with

A Doll House and now ends with *When We Dead Awaken*. This last work deals with experiences I treated in the series as a whole, and makes of it a totality, an entity, and now I am finished with it. If I write anything else, it will be in another context and perhaps also in another form."

The usual interpretation of Ibsen's remarks is that he was referring to the adoption of a new style; he meant, writes biographer Michael Meyer, "that he was finished with orthodox realism and was intending to move ... back towards poetry and symbolism."





Women, Sex and Art

The Killing of Irene—a Backstory

In the late 19th century, it was extremely common for models to double as sexual partners for their artists, and to the general public this type of work was regarded as a category of prostitution. This is a logical explanation as to why Irene's connections with her family and homeland were severed as a very young woman, when she began her modeling career with Rubek.

Irene continually laments having revealed herself, “to thousands of men” which metaphorically correlates to the fact that *The Resurrection* statue, made in her image, has been exhibited worldwide. But indeed with Ibsen, a more realistic and perhaps a more tragic correlation can be made, that with “thousands of men” Irene is saying that she has since modeled for countless other artists; as if, after leaving Rubek, Irene wandered and worked the only way she knew how: by selling her naked body as an object. Searching, but never able to recreate another “child of wet, living clay,” Irene spent lonely years roaming as a model, but they only further stripped away her sense of identity (Jeffrey Hatcher).

Whether or not Irene actually slept with these presumed others is irrelevant concerning her deep feelings of abuse; she is damaged by a type of prostitution. “When one is an object, not a subject,” writes Jean Baker Miller, “one’s sexual impulses and interests are presumed not to exist independently. They are to be brought into existence only by and for others—controlled. Defined, and used.” (*Toward a New Psychology of Women*, 1976.)

Rubek’s emotional dismissal of Irene’s physical form is the seed that grew to destroy her innermost self, and literal-



Hal Cropp and Adrienne Sweeney as Rubek and Irene.

ly outlines her transformation from the humanly subjective into the objective; once pulsing with interpretation and soul, she is drained to a frozen, hollow shell by his rejection. This life of modeling and the “thousands of men” were never intended or even anticipated by Irene, and are indeed a result of Rubek’s treatment of her. In fact, her love for Rubek was so immense, so naïve, that had she vowed her life over to him. Irene: “I held up three fingers and swore I would go with you to the end of the world. To the end of my life I would serve you.” (*When We Dead Awaken*, Hatcher, p. 18)

Although Rubek tells Irene that he could “hardly restrain” himself from her naked body, we see that the damage to her psyche has been permanently rooted. He tells her, “You were a sacred thing never to be touched, never to be thought of but in adoration.” Irene, however, longed for a physical declaration of their allegiance to one another and their “child.” The physical connection that would have been Irene’s rapture was the same connection



that Rubek thought would damn his soul and “ruin what I’d lived to create.” (Hatcher, p. 19)

With this dichotomy, the play might be saying that, “Being idealized can be as destructive as being objectified, in the sense that idealization imposes a universal and transcendental meaning on each body, and there remains no place for exposure of originality and the self.” (“Women, Body, Art: Henrik Ibsen’s *When We Dead Awaken* and *A Doll House*,” Fateme Mirahmadi and Leila Baradaran Jamili, *Journal of Novel Applied Sciences*, 2014.) *When We Dead Awaken* positions us at a nexus among the relationships of art and love, divinity and lust, the ideal and the tangible.

Camille Claudel—A Digression

Female Parisian sculptor and model Camille Claudel is a historic example of feminine oppression in late 19th century art. She was one of the first women on the arts scene during La Belle Époque, or Golden Age, of Paris. At the age of 19 she arrived at the famous sculptor Auguste Rodin’s studio to work as an assistant. She began modeling as figures and assisted sculpting the most delicate areas like hands and feet. “Rodin was quickly drawn to her—and her evident talent—and before long, she was his model, lover, inspiration and artistic equal.” (Afria Akbar, independent.co.uk/art)



The letters from the beginning of Rodin’s relationship with Claudel reveal just how smitten he was with the young lady,

despite his already being in a committed relationship. In 1886 he followed her on a visit to England. Accounts of this early stage depict Claudel as elusive and teasingly coy with the famous sculptor. Rodin, meanwhile, held the reputation of a womanizer, being a sculptor who specialized in the female nude, and he required fresh models regularly.

Thus began a long, complicated affair and creative collaboration that would last nearly 15 years. She was his muse and changed the course of his work. Art experts agree that there is a clear change to Rodin’s sculptures before and after Claudel came into his life. The two inspired each other equally. Some works still can’t be credited to either artist; they are not signed and some seem to be made with two pairs of hands, by both of them.

In her own sculpture, Claudel pursued the ephemeral, a fleeting moment in motion, the just-gone. But her work was quickly subject to gendered censorship because of nudity. Once, inspectors visited the studio and refused her permission to cast *The Waltz*, because it showed two naked bodies in close proximity. This was seen as unacceptable, coming from a woman’s hand, as only men were allowed to render sexual desire and the nude body. It is largely speculated that much of Camille Claudel’s work was disguised with Rodin’s name for its preservation.

As relations intensified between the two lovers, Rodin’s wife, Rose Beuret, naturally became a greater concern for Claudel. Rodin was 25 years her senior, and was not prepared to leave his long-term partner, though he often told her—even vowed in writing once—that he would.

In 1888 Claudel moved out of her parents’ house and rented a small apartment in Paris. Shortly after, Rodin purchased a house nearby known as La Folie-Neufbourg. Here the lovers were said to have



occasionally lived together, while Beuret remained at Rodin's primary residence. During this time, Rodin sculpted several portraits of Claudel, and Claudel sculpted her *Bust of Rodin* (1892), the artist's favorite portrait of himself. Claudel also began working on her masterpiece *The Waltz* (begun in 1891), which depicts a couple entwined in a dance.



Camille Claudel at work.

While Claudel's work flourished, her relationship with Rodin progressively deteriorated. She did not want to share Rodin with Beuret, and she was not content, either, being merely the muse of her famous lover; she wanted a successful career of her own. The break between the lovers took years, but by 1889 the relationship was over. Following the breakup, Claudel is thought to have been her most productive, completing some of her most original and advanced works, including *L'Age Mur* (1898), an autobiographical sculpture depicting a love triangle, and *La Vague* (1900), with three female figures bathing under an enormous wave.

In the early 1900s, Claudel is said to have begun a pattern of working obsessively for months, then destroying her creations. She became reclusive, out of touch with the world, and let her apartment fall into a state of despair.

"Alone as a woman of her class, not married to the man with whom she had a sexual relation, perhaps deeply distraught by the loss of love and undergoing major changes in her life cycle, while she watched her own sculptural ideas make Rodin the lionized figure of French sculptures, she may well have had some kind of psychological breakdown." (Writer, producer, actress Gaël Le Cornec.)

While her artistic career had its highlights, she never managed to earn enough money to be fully independent. At times, Rodin paid the rent on her studio. Originally from a rich family, Claudel was wandering streets in beggar's clothes. As a child, her father was the only one to admire her talent and support her sculpting. But only three days after her father's death, her brother and mother—who had always been suspicious of her lifestyle—admitted Claudel to an insane asylum. She was 39 years old.



A reproduction of
The Waltz.



For the remaining 30 years of her life, Claudel languished. She wrote letters begging her brother and mother to release her and let her return to the artist's life, but her time as a sculptor was over. Diagnosed as suffering from a persecution complex, she remained deeply paranoid of Rodin, and blamed him for her troubles.

Whether or not Claudel was truly insane and needed to stay in an asylum remains unclear. She constantly wrote articulate, lucid letters to her family and friends, and even her doctors recommended that she be released on multiple

occasions. Her brother and mother never allowed it.

"I live in a world that is so curious, so strange," Claudel wrote in a letter to a friend in 1935. "Of the dream which was my life, this is the nightmare." She died eight years later, on October 19, 1943, in Mont de Vergues, France.

Since her death, this fiercely independent figure in Rodin's life has prompted much revisionist history, and an eponymous, Oscar-nominated film capturing her tragic life story was released in 1988.

"THE ARTIST'S STRUGGLE"

Ibsen & Rubek

With the exception of Falk in *Love's Comedy*, Rubek is the only Ibsen protagonist who is an artist, and "as in the earlier play," Templeton writes, Ibsen "mercilessly examines the egotism and self-absorption of a man for whom the world and its people are grist to his mill."

Although Rubek is a sculptor, the sharpest term that Ibsen can stab him with is "poet." Irene recounts back to Rubek his own ridicule of poetry as "weak. Forgiving of sins of the flesh, sins of commission." (Hatcher, p. 39)

This is not only a criticism of the writer, but a mocking commentary on Ibsen's own definition of the art form, that "to write is to pass judgment upon oneself." Therefore, "in judging this act of judging, *When We Dead Awaken* pronounces upon the author a meta-judgment of extreme severity." (Templeton)

In this way, *When We Dead Awaken* is a personal epilogue. The great poet is examining how the artist must choose to spend his or her own time on earth, and perhaps is even acknowledging that by

servicing his artistic duty, Ibsen himself may have missed out on certain aspects of life. Rubek struggles with balancing the private, "insensitive, selfish" lifestyle of the artist to the "normal life" of other men, but comes to the conclusion that normalcy is not meant for him: "It's not that I desire a normal life like other men but can't have it for some reason particular to my own peculiar state. I don't want it! I don't need it! All I want is to work. My mind, my eyes, my hands are calibrated to do one thing: work." (Hatcher, p. 30)

We may take Rubek's conclusion as Ibsen's own. Like Rubek, to have abandoned his lifework for "life" would have made Ibsen a miserable man, and he knew this well. He viewed his work as his reason for living, and as he gained international fame and his influence grew, he came to look at himself and his career as a part of history. Both men willingly sacrificed their lives to their work, and through Rubek, we may see Ibsen hinting towards his own pondering about life outside of it.



Ibsen's Death

While writing *When We Dead Awaken*, Ibsen felt truly ill for the first time in his life. Templeton claims that, “He wrote the play at a fever pitch, as though he was afraid that he would fall seriously ill before finishing it,” and three months after its publication, he suffered the first of the debilitating strokes that would eventually make further writing impossible. But even the reaper could not keep the legendary, creative genius at bay. Even after a series

of strokes that left him virtually unable to walk, Ibsen said that if his health returned, he would write a new play.

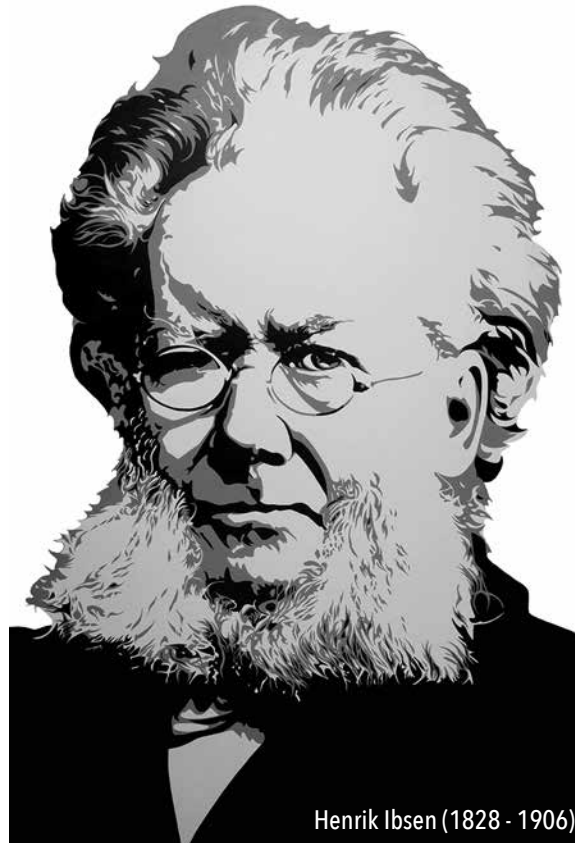
About a year before he died, six and a half years after he wrote *When We Dead Awaken*, by which time he had become almost completely disabled and confined to his bed, Ibsen is said to have called out in his sleep: “I’m writing! And it’s coming along wonderfully.”

ALL GOOD THINGS

As the saying goes, an ending comes at last to all good things. So too for our beloved Ibsen Festival.

As we say farewell to this chapter of the Commonwealth’s unfolding story, we look back over almost two decades of festivals in which we assembled some of the greatest celebrations of All Things Scandinavian in Minnesota, possibly in North America. We’ve proudly coordinated and hosted speakers, artists, craftspeople, bakers, distillers, writers—and yes, theatre artists—to celebrate the great Norwegian playwright, his culture and our work as storytellers.

This isn’t goodbye—given his status as one of the great modern playwrights, Henrik Ibsen will never be far from our hearts or our list of potential playwrights to produce—so instead we’ll say, “We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when...”



Henrik Ibsen (1828 - 1906).