“I must stand quite alone, if I am to understand myself and everything about me. It is for that reason that I cannot remain with you any longer,” says Nora Helmer assuredly in the concluding act of Ibsen’s celebrated *A Doll’s House*. In a moment of lucidity, she abruptly relinquishes socially-imposed duties owed to her children, marriage, and home to pursue something altogether inimitable: herself. She prepares to leave. She slams the door behind her. She is gone.

Traditional feminists construed this act to be Ibsen’s categorical defense of female autonomy in the modern context. As Ibsen himself along with a host of scholars now repudiate this interpretation - arguing that Ibsen was a humanist, and not a feminist – it is now considered outmoded in academic circles. In its place a novel and decidedly intercultural discourse is beginning to mature. As a result of this post-modern and post-colonial tide of rethinking, the specter of Nora Helmer assumes new shapes, images and meanings.

“Nora is, I think, very much a male imagination which is used as a disguise to reflect what men would like to do, and not what women would like to do,” says University of Toronto professor Antje Budde, “The early feminist movement was very much interested in the play, for political reasons. But nowadays, you rarely find a woman directing it. What you find more often is that women take the trouble to rewrite it.”

If she were to stage the play today, Budde says she would opt for an all-male cast. “This would be the most honest take, I think.”

Casting a shadow on the traditional interpretations of the play, Budde considers, “We don’t really know whether she leaves or not.” Pertinent questions emerge from conventionally assumed realities. For her part, Budde is intimately acquainted with such questions, as they were, expressly, the topic of her graduate level course *How to Slam the Door: Nora, Intercultural and Intermedial Approaches*, and they continue to be, broadly, the very questions that drive her pursuits in scholarship.

Undergraduate students of the course *Concepts of 21st Century Theatre* remember Budde for her characteristic first-day class agenda etched on the chalkboard: 1. Administration 2. Syllabus 3. Decentralize world-view. Though the class focuses primarily on Western theatre practitioners,
Budde makes it a point to encourage a comparative perspective by including international practitioners as well. Having earned her PhD from Humboldt-University in Berlin, she has conducted numerous projects in her native Germany and China.

“Having watched a number of productions of *A Doll’s House*, I thought to develop a graduate-level course because it might be interesting for students to travel through time and space while focusing on the same thing, which is this play” she said.

Budde was twenty when she first encountered Frank Castorf’s avant-garde production of *A Doll’s House*. Attempting to evade censorship in the East German state, Castorf staged the play in an “insignificant and boring town” north of the country, close to the Polish border. The aesthetic choices exposed a roving experimental spirit: a projected Mickey Mouse dashes across the stage; Dr. Rank is a cynical lesbian with a flirtatious eye for Nora; the latter becomes a mouthpiece for long philosophical digressions, and “Hony Tonk Woman” penned first by the Rolling Stones. When Nora leaves, she literally leaves the theatre through a backstage opening.

In short, “It was the most extraordinary production of Ibsen’s play I was able to witness,” says Budde, precisely because it invited the audience to speculate.

During the early 1990s, while studying at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, Budde began to collaborate in productions with the National Experimental Theatre and was exposed to the vestiges of China’s colonial past. This was apparent in Chinese perceptions of naturalism in Ibsen’s work. In 1995, director Wu Xiaojiang made arrangements to stage a Chinese-Norwegian collaboration of *Doll’s House*. Inspired by Budde’s cross-cultural, bi-lingual production of *Woyzeck*, Wu incorporated a similar approach by casting an English-speaking Norwegian Nora, along with the Mandarin-speaking Chinese company. The bilingual aspect served to shed light on the difficulty of intercultural marriage.

“My experiences in China, accompanied with my knowledge of Chinese history and the language changed my perspective of the world and its implications for theatre” says Budde. Strangely enough, as these crucial years abroad would serve to mould her cross-cultural approach, Budde often summoned the striking image - from Otfried Preussler’s *The Little Waterman* - of a waterboy looking out from his underwater pot. The story is a childhood favourite.

Towards the end of the academic year, students had examined several productions of Ibsen’s play and deftly absorbed the various political discourses surrounding Nora Helmer’s unexpected change of heart. The course confirmed, for instance, an embedded politics of labour division in the performing arts, wherein men direct and women act. As a result, Budde has argued, “Women have their own tendency of inventing their own versions of Ibsen’s them in alternative writings.”

These alternative writings have had a remarkable reach, crossing borders, and finding new voices in new contexts. Whether it be Tracie Chimo Utok Ezeajugh’s Nigerian adaptation

http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/wit/index
Nneora: An African Doll’s House or Marjorie Chan’s Chinese-Canadian positioning of China Doll, women theatre practitioners have probed the timeless themes of the play to offer their own interpretive reconsiderations to anthropological questions about family and responsibility.

Instructing a course about intercultural theatre is not without pedagogical challenges. “I guess everyone has an understanding of what intercultural theatre is, and it seems to be the biggest obstacle. When you deal with multiple perspectives, you need to know a number of histories, and you need to be able to distance yourself from everything you thought you knew for certain. The biggest challenge is to have the courage to let go of what you think you know.” She explains.

Though intellectual and emotional openness are the prerequisites to intercultural scholarship, students often find themselves trapped in unjustified notions of universalism that is “based only on what they know.”

Opening new epistemic doors to learning is a task easier said than done; expunging obsolete methods from habit is equally daunting. While not all of us can be as nimble-minded as Nora in the concluding act of Ibsen’s play, with respect to intercultural scholarship, it is better to open new doors with an exploratory spirit, concludes Budde, than avoid these potentially new and enriching avenues with an insular one.