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A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE ACTING OF ALLA NAZIMOVA

by

Margaret McKerrow

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Speech)
in The University of Michigan
1974

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> Here at last . . . is a force intensely modern and revolutionary, whose coming has given us an intellectual medium capable of speaking to the minds of men.[1]

These words were written about the Russian actress Alla Nazimova shortly after she made her first English speaking appearance on the American stage in 1906. The tribute came at the beginning of a significant theatrical career which would span the first four decades of the twentieth century and would see a complete change in the style of acting prevalent in the United States. Many theatre historians believe that Nazimova's first performances on the stages of New York City were the direct harbinger of the "new acting"[2] which would culminate with the performances of the Moscow Art Theatre in America in the 1920s and eventually lead to the development of "method" acting in the United States. Nazimova's arrival had been significant to "the evolution of the drama and the development of dramatic interpretation."[3]

Fashions in acting change from time to time, and in 1906 Nazimova's style of performance was in direct

contrast to the work of the "personality" actors who had flourished on the stages of America since at least 1875. The early 1900s was a period of great theatrical expansion and developing interest in realism.[4] Nazimova, therefore, who employed a rather naturalistic style of acting developed through training under Nemirovitch-Dantchenko and Constantin Stanislavsky, and reinforced by her work with the talented Russian actor, Paul Orleneff,[5] was immediately acclaimed, "One of the most remarkable actresses of the times."[6] In his article "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," Clifford C. Ashby states:

> American theatre at this time was going willy-nilly down the road to realism. Both scenery and playwrighting were becoming increasingly true-to-life, but acting had not kept pace with the trend toward verisimilitude. The style of performance remained that of the preceeding century; formalized, declamatory, melodramatic. Although the actor often found himself enclosed by a realistic box setting, examination of photographs from the period will show that his technique would have been more consonant with wings and drops.[7]

Alla Nazimova's "new acting" was markedly different for several reasons. She was willing to submerge her own personality and to appear totally different in each role she portrayed; she chose to say her lines rather than declaim them; she paid hommage to the playwright's intention; and, even in performance, she experimented with different ways of playing a role in order to realize her characters to her satisfaction.[8] Critics

observed that Nazimova's acting of a role often made the meaning of a play more palpable for the audience than the same role performed by another actress. Frank Vreeland remarked:

> During those early years when she played A Doll's House, The Master Builder and Little Eyolf, a critic made a distinction between her type of performance and that of Minnie Maddern Fiske, also distinguished for Ibsen performances. "If the actress you're seeing knows what she's saying but you don't, it's Mrs. Fiske," the critic said, "but if the actress doesn't know what she is saying and you do, it's Alla Nazimova."[9]

While almost every book written about theatre in the United States between 1906 and 1945 mentions Nazimova and praises her work, particularly in Ibsen, very few detailed articles have been written about the actress since her death in 1945. The primary materials which do exist include the article by Ashby, mentioned earlier, which appeared in the Quarterly Journal of Speech in April, 1959; an article by Alexander Kirkland called "The Woman from Yalta" which appeared in Theatre Arts Monthly in 1949; and an article by De Witt Bodeen entitled "Nazimova" which appeared in Films in Review in December, 1972.

Alla Nazimova's first performances in the United States of America, and her contribution to the development of the "new acting" have been documented frequently, most notably by Ashby. This study, therefore, acknowledges the fact that Nazimova "was an actress whose

career constituted an important contribution to the progress of modern drama,"[10] and attempts to describe in detail, not only those first momentous performances, but other representative performances during her career.

The purpose of this study is to trace the chronology of the career of the actress Alla Nazimova, to describe in detail her significant performances in the United States and to report the critical response to her work. Also included is a description of the training the actress received in Russia and a depiction of her acting technique as gleaned from personal interviews the actress had with reporters and writers during her life in America. Finally an attempt is made to evaluate the reasons for the various successes and failures of her career.

Undoubtedly, when Nazimova first arrived in New York City she was unique; certainly she was the first actress who had worked with Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre to appear on the American stage. As previously stated, however, fashions in acting change; by exploring the varied forty year career of the actress in America, it should be possible to perceive how her performances in each different phase of her career were affected by the spirit of the time, the roles that were available for her to portray, the plays she selected to perform, the changes she made in her acting style, and

the public and critical reception to her work. No actress can perform in a vacuum; she must be responsive to the mood and tempo of the period in which she is existing. Popularity and success only come to the performer who is able to be appealing to his public, even though he and the public are continually changing.

In order to elucidate meaningfully Nazimova's career on the stage, this study is divided into four sections, each one describing a separate phase of the actress's theatrical experiences. The first section details her theatrical training, her apprenticeship in Russian stock companies, and her experiences with Paul Orleneff and the St. Petersburg Players. The section concludes with a description of the actress's acting technique, and her personal appearance.

Chapters III, IV and V each cover a phase of Nazimova's career as an actress in the United States. These three chapters, which detail the forty years that Nazimova performed in this country, are similarly subdivided. Each begins with a chronological sketch delineating the plays or films in which the actress performed during the period covered. The second section of each chapter gives detailed descriptions of selected plays or films from that period. Particular emphasis is given to the critical response to each production. When the play selected can be considered a classic of the theatre, the

play itself is not described. Each chapter has a brief concluding section which describes Nazimova's personal reactions to a particular aspect of her career.

Chapter III describes the actress's rapid rise to stardom in the United States in 1906, and then traces her career on the stage through her season of Ibsen in repertory which was directed by Arthur Hopkins in 1918. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of Nazimova's theories about performing in the plays of Henrik Ibsen, the playwright who brought her the greatest success in her first years on the American stage.

Chapter IV describes Nazimova's experiences while acting in vaudeville and film. After the chronology it depicts Nazimova's history-making career in vaudeville, covers her two careers in film (one in silent film between 1915 and 1923 and one in sound film in the 1940's), and concludes with a discussion of the actress's personal reactions to her experiences with the motion picture industry.

Chapter V delineates the concluding phase of Nazimova's work in the theatre, from her return to stardom in Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard in 1928 through her gratifying success with her own production of Ghosts in 1936. This chapter closes after covering Nazimova's personal reactions to her roles as a mature performer, her directing technique, and evaluating the reasons for

her great success in the last phase of her career on the stage.

The major resources for the material presented in this paper have been the many newspaper and magazine articles written about the actress during her career on the stages of the United States of America. Additional information was gained from the many books written about twentieth century film and theatre which gave further insight into the actress's work. Particularly valuable compilations of material were found in the Robinson Locke Scrapbooks in the New York Public Library Theatre Collection and in the H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection in the Film Department of the Library of Congress in Washington D. C.

Viewing of some of the actress's silent and sound films gave a personal glimpse of the artist at work. Films viewed in the Library of Congress Film Department, on television and through rental included Camille, Salome, Bridge of San Luis Rey, Escape, In Our Time and Since You Went Away. It was impossible to see more of the actress's silent films since most of them are no longer extant.[11] Additional glimpses of the actress in performance were available in still photographs in books, magazines and particularly in the New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

Further personal information was gained from many discussions with people who had seen Alla Nazimova perform on the stage and in films and who remembered her vividly. Particularly valuable were discussions with Dr. William P. Halstead from The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre, and with Professors Paul Pfaff and Kinsley Povenmire, now retired from the Drama Department at San Diego State University. Professionals in theatre and film who proved helpful were Harry Ellerbe, whose long detailed letter described his experiences with the actress in Ghosts, and directors Mervyn Le Roy and Rouben Mamoulian, both of whom granted interviews in order to describe their experiences working with Nazimova. All this material proved valuable in preparing this study which attempts to describe in detail the acting of Alla Nazimova whom John Mason Brown called, "One of the rarest talents of our stage."[12]

Footnotes

[1]Owen Johnson, "Madame Alla Nazimova," Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine, LXXIV (June, 1907), 227.

[2]Clifford C. Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," Quarterly Journal of Speech, LXV (April, 1959), 182-88.

[3]Johnson, "Madame Alla Nazimova," op. cit., p. 223.

[4]In 1900 there were forty-three theatre in New York City, but by 1926 their number had expanded to eighty.

[5]There are many variations of the spelling of this Russian actor's name. Orleneff seems to be the preferred spelling in America and will be used throughout this paper except in direct quotations.

[6]New York Times, November 14, 1906, 9:3.

[7]Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," op. cit., p. 183.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Frank Vreeland, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[10]Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," op. cit., p. 188.

[11]Early films deteriorated easily and were only saved through careful storage by the artists involved in their making. Since Nazimova did not approve of most of the silent films she made, few of them were saved.

[12]Quoted in Bernard Sobel, The New Theatre Handbook (New York: Crown, 1959), p. 569.

CHAPTER II

EARLY BIOGRAPHY AND THEATRICAL TRAINING

Childhood in Russia

The birth of Alla Nazimova, an event which would ultimately have a profound impact on the theatrical history of the United States of America, took place in Yalta, Crimea, Russia on June 4, 1879. Nazimova's father was a chemist. Accordingly, the actress described her family as middle-class; she stated: " . . . we had all the conventional reserves and prejudices of the average Russian middle-class family."[1] Several sources indicate that, although the family may have been middle-class, it was quite wealthy. Clifford Ashby describes Nazimova's parents as wealthy and Jewish,[2] and some affluence is indicated by the fact that, in her youth Nazimova's family traveled to Switzerland and lived there for several years.

In 1922 Nazimova described her youth in Russia to Mary B. Mullett of American Magazine. In the revealing interview Nazimova claimed that she had been an extremely unattractive and rather dull child.

> "I was a fat, dull, slow, awkward child; with no particular talents, no dreams of ambition, no consuming interest of any kind. They used to call me by a Russian nickname that meant 'little bear;' because that was what I was like--a fat little cub. In Switzerland, where I spent part of my childhood, they gave me a German nickname meaning 'little ball;' something that could be rolled along, but couldn't really walk. I remember seeing a picture that had been taken of me when I was five years old, and of asking my mother if I had really been like that; so fat and dull! And she assured me that I had been the very slowest of all her children."[3]

Although she may have been a dull little child, Nazimova claimed that her early life was full of beauty. "Unconsciously I was preparing for my art,"[4] she told Lucille Erskine in another of the interviews the actress granted after she achieved fame in the United States.

Nazimova's early childhood was spent in a house in Yalta which she described to Miss Erskine during the 1912 interview. "Our house was right on the water, and in the winter the waves would splash against the windows and the salt lashed the glass like stones."[5] By the time the child was six, however, she was attending a private school in Montreux, Switzerland. Although some sources imply that the family stayed in Yalta, it seems probable that the whole family moved to Switzerland during the years Nazimova attended school in Montreux.

During her stay in Switzerland, Nazimova expressed a keen interest in music and began to study the violin. After rapidly demonstrating exceptional talent on the instrument, violin lessons and practice

became an important part of the young girl's life. The lessons continued when the family returned to Russia, where the actress studied the violin with Savelson in Yalta. She later remarked: "By the time I was eleven I was thought to be an infant prodigy and I gave a concert in a little town in the South of Russia."[6] By the time she was thirteen Nazimova's violin expertise had taken her to Odessa, where she studied at a branch of the Petrograd Conservatory. At the Conservatory Nazimova studied harmony and composition and played first violin in a student orchestra which contained more than two hundred and fifty musicians.[7] Eventually the Conservatory Orchestra played before the musical notables of Russia, including Rimsky-Korsakov.[8]

Nazimova's music lessons give us one of the few impressions we have of the actress's relationship with her father. This insight comes in an article by Katherine Roberts, which appeared in Collier's in 1932. Nazimova reminisced with the writer about her childhood. She remembered that "I gave up lying much earlier than other people, I was no good at it anyway." The actress disclosed that she had lied to her father about the number of hours she spent practicing on the violin. She indicated that the lying was promoted by fear of punishment.

> "I lied when I was a little girl because I was afraid of my father. I was more afraid of him than anyone I have ever known."[9]

The basic educational process which Nazimova must have experienced while in school in Switzerland and Russia was rarely discussed by the frequently interviewed actress. She did tell Mary Mullett.

> "I never could understand mathematics; I wouldn't even try. The only studies in which I did at all well were literature and history; but I was practically always at the foot of the class or perilously near it."[10]

In the Mullett interview Nazimova stated that during her years of puberty she had no ambition which could have driven her to a desire to learn in order to succeed. While playing the violin was time consuming, there is no indication that Nazimova herself ever believed that it could lead to a career. In fact, years later she remarked that she found the instrument "too difficult."[11]

During all the years Nazimova studied the violin the theatre had no part of her life. Although the actress occasionally attended operas on boarding school outings; as a young girl she was concerned only with the musical performance. The theatricals were ignored.

A change in Nazimova's fortunes came at the age of sixteen when, as a young woman, she developed an overwhelming interest in drama. The interest was aroused when Nazimova visited a family which was

involved in an amateur dramatic group. The actress told Mary Mullett:

> " . . . while they were rehearsing they let me hold their parts, so that I could prompt them. As a result, before my visit ended I had determined that I would be an actress. You must not think that it had come to me as a sudden revelation of something I passionately desired. In Russia, at that time there were very few things a woman could do. She could marry, or teach, or go on the stage. That was about all. I was too young to think of marriage. The idea of my being able to teach was absurd even to me. . . . The only thing left was the stage. So I settled on that as a career."[12]

Nazimova knew she wanted to become an actress, but, of course, the decision was easier to make than to implement. The aspiring actress's father was too ill to consult; moreover the stage was not a career that a middle-class Russian chemist would select for his daughter. Nazimova's elder brother became her guardian, but he, too, was obdurately against a career on the stage. During the difficult year which passed before Nazimova's brother realized that she was really serious, the young girl managed to get some training from a former actress now living in Yalta. According to Nazimova, this early training was difficult.

> "I had an atrocious accent, a mixture of Russian, German and French, due to my having lived in Switzerland as well as Yalta and Odessa. She [the former actress] tried to improve it, but I think she found it almost hopeless."[13]

After a trying year Nazimova's brother finally relented. Nazimova described his terms: "He insisted

that before attempting the stage itself, I must go to the Dramatic School in Moscow, a branch of the Philharmonic Society." She added: "I have never ceased to be grateful to him for that."[14]

The decision to enter Dramatic School finally made, the next step was getting admitted. Each applicant had to give a recitation as an audition. Nazimova selected a poem and confidently prepared it. She described the professor's reaction to her reading.

> "When I had finished the professor looked me up and down--and then asked me to do it all over again; because, as he cuttingly observed, he hadn't understood one word of what I had been saying. And I had thought I was putting into it all the expression and feeling it was possible to convey!"[15]

The second reading must have been better because Nazimova was accepted as a pupil in the Dramatic School. The actress later described her surprise at being admitted after the awkward audition.

> "The only way I can explain my being accepted at all is this: I was from the South; and you know what that implies--a certain emotional sensibility and also a lack of constraint. I think what the professor saw in me was the eagerness of youth and the unrepression of the South. Given those two qualities, he though he might make something of me."[16]

Alla Nazimova's childhood included travel to Switzerland, knowledge of several languages, and the discipline necessitated by the serious study of a musical instrument. A new phase of her life began when she traveled to Moscow to begin her studies in drama.

Theatrical Education

Moscow Philharmonic Society Dramatic School.--Nazimova embarked on the three year course of the Moscow Philharmonic Society Dramatic School in 1896 along with the sixty other students who were admitted in her class. Directed by Nemirovitch-Dantchenko, " . . . one of the most profound directors and teachers in Russian theatre,"[17] the drama school offered an ambitious program which included ballet and fencing along with history of the drama, play comprehension and, of course, practice in acting. Morton Eustis describes the program and its goals as consisting of "four years of improvisation, rigorous training in body control, voice culture, facial mobility, to achieve an ability first to understand and then to project."[18]

The first problem that the young Nazimova had to conquer was a rather awkward overweight body. She stated, " . . . I had to be made over physically. There is no place for a fat actress except in farce."[19] The program scheduled to solve this problem included vigorous exercises, plus practice in ballet and fencing during each of the three years of her residence at the school. Before the end of her third year Nazimova had developed the slender, agile body which would be so praised by critics after she arrived in the United States.

During Nazimova's first year at the dramatic school she proved to be an excellent student of theatre history. The actress indicated that it was success in this field that convinced the Philharmonic School to let her continue in their program.

The second year program added two new classes. The students were required to act in short scenes from the classics; in addition, they practiced impromptu play reading. Most of the pupils found the play reading extraordinarily difficult, but Nazimova excelled at it. The professor would assign roles to the class members, then the class would read the whole play at one sitting. Nazimova particularly remembered the reading of a play entitled Magda. She read so well that the professor in charge of the seminar did not believe that the young actress had never been exposed to the play or the story before reading it in class.

In the course of Nazimova's third year at the drama school she vindicated herself in the eyes of that same professor. Asked to read a role in a new play in manuscript form, Nazimova became so involved that by the end of the reading tears were streaming down her face. The professor eagerly praised the actress for "her marvelous quickness of perception."[20]

The actress reported to Mary Mullett that this incident finally aroused in Nazimova the striving

ambition to succeed which was to mark her entire career in the theatre. She said:

> "Before that, I had thought very little about myself, I had been absorbed in my work, but in an objective way. I hadn't speculated much over my own possibilities. But when he said that to me, before the whole class, something woke in my mind of my soul. From that time I knew what ambition was. It put into me the thing I had lacked before--a burning purpose."[21]

From that moment on Nazimova's acting abilities grew and strengthened. She had finally arrived at that state which is necessary for success in the acting profession--belief in self.

An article written by Nazimova for Theatre Magazine in April, 1928 describes several of the actresses experiences with Nemirovitch-Dantchenko, Director of the Dramatic School of the Moscow Philharmonic Society. According to Nazimova, he was dictatorial in class, but developed an excellent rapport with his students by indulging in long discussions after formal classes were over. The actress observed that Nemirovitch-Dantchenko was already working with Stanislavsky, but that he was rather aprehensive about giving up teaching and playwriting in order to form the Moscow Art Theatre.[22]

The Society of Art and Literature performed Hauptmann's The Sunken Bell, directed by Stanislavsky, during Nazimova's second year at the dramatic school. The drama students received free tickets for the performance, and Nazimova remembered their reaction to the play.

"We were already considering ourselves professionals. And we had much fun watching these 'amateurs.'"[23]

Nazimova evidently had good cause to consider herself a professional. By the end of her third year at the Moscow Philharmonic Society Dramatic School only eight of the original sixty entrants were left. The young actress ranked at the top of that group. For a final examination at the school Nazimova performed in Nemirovitch-Dantchenko's drama Gold and Ibsen's Little Eyolf. The plays were presented on the stage of the small Imperial Theatre in Moscow. Passing this test with high marks, the actress was awarded a gold medal, although she did not receive it because she could not afford to pay for it.

Moscow Art Theatre.--In 1898, while Alla Nazimova was a student at the Moscow Philharmonic Society, Stanislavsky and Nemirovitch-Dantchenko had their famous long meeting which led to the founding of the Moscow Art Theatre. Upon graduation from the Philharmonic Society, the talented young actress was offered the opportunity to continue her schooling at the Moscow Art Theatre, while playing minor roles in their productions. She accepted and agreed to work with the company for one year.

Nazimova had worked with the Moscow Art Theatre while she was still a student at the Moscow Philharmonic Society Dramatic School. In an article which appeared in

Theatre Magazine in 1928, she described participating in some of the famous theatre's early performances.

> When the two groups merged [MAT and MPSDS], our school automatically became part of the theatre, and one of our duties was to go on the stage and play small parts. The first season we did Tolstoy's Tsar Fyodor Ivanovitch; Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice (I was a flower girl in this production); Goldoni's La Locandiera and The Happiness of Greta; Tchekov's The Sea Gull; Sophocles Antigone and Ibsen's Hedda Gabler. The next year we did Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan the Terrible; Hauptmann's Drayman Henschel Tchekov's Uncle Vanya and Hauptmann's Lonely Lives. In all these plays, I had small parts on stage or backstage.[24]

The only play at the Moscow Art Theatre in which the actress had any lines was Ivan the Terrible. Nazimova later told Mary Mullett that even saying the one line she had was terrifying: " . . . --and if the redoubtable Ivan ever reduced anyone to the abject terror I suffered when I had to speak that one line, he must indeed have been a monster."[25] If we may believe Owen Johnson, however, the small part the actress portrayed gave a demonstration of the growing skill of the young performer. In Ivan the Terrible Nazimova played an old woman in a scene of famine.

> It was but a moment of frenzy and despair; but so vivid was the characterization of age and starvation that, although the part was only episodic, criticism of the play marked the incident for comment and appreciation.[25]

In various interviews given after Nazimova became well-known in the United States, the actress described her experiences with Nemirovitch-Dantchenko

and Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre. One account, given in the article the actress wrote for Theatre Magazine, describes a conversation Nazimova had with Nemirovitch-Dantchenko shortly after her graduation from the Moscow Philharmonic Society Dramatic School. The eminent director suggested that Nazimova should spend the summer working in a stock company in order to gain further experience and poise. He added:

> Never be afraid to make a failure. Find out what plays they are going to produce during the summer engagement; mark in your mind the parts you wish to play well; forget all the others and deliberately fail in them. Don't give yourself to them at all, but remember the things for which you are marking time. Meanwhile play melodramas, pantomime, farce, anything that comes along.[27]

While Nazimova was to spend a year at the Moscow Art Theatre before she was fully able to realize her professor's suggestion, it evidently did prove valuable when the actress began working with Russian stock companies in 1900.

Immediately following up on Nemirovitch-Dantchenko's advice, the hopeful actress then went off to Bobruisk to spend a summer working in the theatre. The experience proved unsatisfactory. Nazimova was supposed to stay in Bobruisk for several months, "But I got fed up with it after a few weeks,"[28] she later stated; and the actress returned to Moscow.

Upon her return, according to the account in Theatre Magazine, Nazimova again went to Nemirovitch-

Dantchenko for advice. She requested permission to remain at the Moscow Art Theatre. Nemirovitch-Dantchenko seemed unable to help the actress, but he suggested that Nazimova talk her problem over with Stanislavsky. Stanislavsky, too, felt that what Nazimova needed was opportunities to appear onstage in a variety of roles. The Moscow Art Theatre could not provide this experience for a novice performer. But Nazimova was adamant. She was determined to stay at the Moscow Art Theatre for at least another year. Even though there were not going to be any roles that the actress could play during the year, Stanislavsky finally agreed to let her stay. The article in Theatre Magazine reprints Nazimova's version of this important conversation with Stanislavsky.

> [Stanislavsky] said there weren't any parts. I replied; "I don't want any parts. I don't feel that I am good enough." "But," Stanislavsky said, "You ought to act." I replied: "I don't just want to act. I don't want any big parts. I don't want anything. I will be satisfied simply with walking on and doing small bits and studying stage management." "Alright," [sic] said Stanislavsky, "if you want to do that."[29]

Accordingly, Nazimova stayed on for a year and sat in the back row of the theatre watching Stanislavsky and Nemirovitch-Dantchenko direct.

The year at the Moscow Art Theatre did prove fruitful. "I learned a great deal," the actress later wrote.[30] In his article about Nazimova which appeared in Theatre Arts Monthly, Alexander Kirkland reported his

enjoyment of the stories the actress had told him about her experiences with the Moscow Art Theatre. "I remember her stories of the Moscow Art Theatre, the reverent concentration at rehearsal, the sacrosanct stage whose boards an actor was not permitted to tread except at performance."[31]

Continuing the story of this eventful year in her life, Nazimova described her first opportunity to play an important role in a play at the Moscow Art Theatre. One day Nemirovitch-Dantchenko informed the actress that she had been selected to enact the leading role in a play entitled The Artists. However, since the role was that of a society woman, the director suggested that Nazimova spend some time studying the behavior of the very rich. According to her story, Nazimova repaired to Petersburg to stay with a young woman friend who was engaged to be married to the secretary of one of the Imperial Ministers. Nazimova had met the young woman while working with the stock company in Bobruisk. Nazimova stayed in Petersburg for three weeks, indulging in a grand whirl of social engagements. "I met Grand Dukes, Counts, Princes, and so forth. We went everywhere--the theatre, the circus, the opera." Finally, newly educated in society etiquette, Nazimova returned to Nemirovitch-Dantchenko and the Moscow Art Theatre. There, however, misfortune awaited her. After waiting for three

weeks to see her director, Nazimova finally buttonholed him, only to be told, "We have decided not to produce the play."[32] According to Nazimova, she was deeply hurt by this and she left the Moscow Art Theatre forever.

Whether or not we accept the romantic version of her year at the Moscow Art Theatre that Nazimova told Theatre Magazine, it is clear that the actress spent some time playing minor roles at the famous theatre while observing the work of Stanislavsky and Nemirovitch-Dantchenko. In fact, historians consider that Nazimova was the first actress associated with Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre to appear on the American stage.

For example, in her book The Stanislavsky Heritage, Christine Edwards states: "In Nazimova, American audiences saw for the first time a pupil of Stanislavsky and an exponent of the 'new acting.'"[33] De Witt Bodeen, in his article "Nazimova," states: "She was, indeed, the first student of Constantin Stanislavsky to star on the American stage and screen."[34] The fact is further confirmed by Clifford Ashby in his article "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," which appeared in the Quarterly Journal of Speech in April, 1959. He calls the actress the " . . . first student of Constantin Stanislavsky to appear in this country."[35] In light of this undoubted fact about Nazimova's training, a brief description of the

activities of the Moscow Art Theatre, during the two years that the actress had an opportunity to observe and participate in their activities, will be presented here.

During the first year of the Moscow Art Theatre, two productions were successful out of the nine plays attempted. The two successes were Czar Fyodor, and Chekhov's The Sea Gull; productions of both of these plays would later appear in the repertory of Orleneff's St. Petersburg Players. During this first year Nazimova was concluding her work at the Moscow Philharmonic Society Dramatic School so it is difficult to judge how much the actress could have learned from these undoubtedly fine productions. Certainly she must have seen them since she mentioned them in her article in Theatre Magazine.

The two successful plays were diametrically opposed in subject matter. Czar Fyodor was a picturesque historical drama which Stanislavsky enhanced by filling the stage with "genuine antiques."[36] The Sea Gull, which Stanislavsky later admitted he had not understood at that time, " . . . portrayed the constant attrition of daily life, and the waste, under the social conditions of Old Russia, of youthful energy and talent."[37] The Sea Gull featured the fine actress Olga Knipper and impressed audiences by its marvelous freshness and the quality of the ensemble work.

> The Sea Gull became the emblem of the Moscow Art Theatre and heralded great reforms. Actors were not obsessed by their audiences and could turn their attentions to their characters, bringing psychological depths to the surface; ensemble play was stressed and the actor was asked to subordinate his ego, taking satisfaction from the group's achievement.[38]

It does seem certain that young theatre students in Moscow at that time, must have found the production of The Sea Gull an extraordinarily enriching experience.

The other plays performed during the first year of the Moscow Art Theatre were The Sunken Bell, Men Above the Law, The Merchant of Venice, Greta's Happiness, Antigone, and Hedda Gabler. The only play which figured in Nazimova's later career was Hedda Gabler. The Moscow Art Theatre's production of the drama was considered a failure and was cancelled after only eleven performances.

The second season of the Moscow Art Theatre was the year which Nazimova spent "studying direction at the Moscow Art Theatre."[39] The season opened with Stanislavsky's unsuccessful attempt at the title role in Alexey Tolstoy's historical drama, Death of Ivan the Terrible. Other productions staged during that year were Uncle Vanya, Hauptmann's The Driver Henschel and Shakespeare's Twelfth Night. There is no record of Nazimova performing in any of these plays during her later career.

Nazimova left the fledgling Moscow Art Theatre after that year and began to work with the provincial

stock companies of Russia. What had she learned from Stanislavsky and Nemirovitch-Dantchenko? It seems logical to assume that the actress had worked more with Nemirovitch-Dantchenko than Stanislavsky, since she had worked with him at the Moscow Philharmonic Society Dramatic School as well as at the Moscow Art Theatre. Gorchakov states: "Nemirovitch-Dantchenko was the first to transfer the center of gravity from surface memorization to inner technique."[40] In addition, this brilliant man of the theatre emphasized that actors should elaborate upon the lives of their characters outside the immediate confines of the play. He taught his students to " . . . grasp the entire sense of both play and role. He sensed the life of the character he was to depict on the stage before memorizing the text, before the production, and even before he took his first step on the stage."[41] Certainly Nemirovitch-Dantchenko was a fine teacher, and in later years Nazimova, as one of his pupils, stood in rank with fine actors like Ivan Moskvin, Olga Knipper-Chekhova, and Meyerhold.

When Nazimova left the Moscow Art Theatre Stanislavsky was several years away from formulating his famous "system," but his productions of Czar Fyodor, The Sea Gull, and Uncle Vanya had already demonstrated this innovative man's revolutionary search for new ways to direct theatrical productions. The search for truth

had begun, and the young Nazimova had a wonderful opportunity to observe Stanislavsky at work. It is claimed that many years later the actress repudiated the teaching of the famous director while rehearsing the actors for her production of Ghosts. "She had no patience with Stanislavsky . . . and his methods of acting."[42] But one can only suggest that the undoubted simplicity and naturalism of Nazimova's acting when she first arrived in the United States did owe some debt to her exposure to this brilliant man of the theatre.

Nazimova described to Mary Mullett the decision she made at the end of the year she spent studying at the Moscow Art Theatre where she had been playing small roles and watching Stanislavsky and Nemirovitch-Dantchenko at work.

> "I had to make an important decision: I could go into the company there, taking minor parts at first but with the reasonable hope of gradually getting better ones. But it would be, at best, a slow process. And there, as always on the stage, there would be the struggle to gain, and to benefit by, influence--pull, as we say over here. I could settle myself to that program; or I could turn my back on Moscow, go away to the provinces, and be at least temporarily forgotten. I chose to be forgotten.[43]

Nazimova elected to leave the excitement of Moscow and the Moscow Art Theatre and to seek acting experience in one of the many theatre companies in the provincial cities in Russia. This important decision was to prove a turning point in the life of the young actress.

Nazimova's decision to act in the provinces would eventually lead her to a career in the United States.

Apprenticeship

Russian Stock Companies.--The inexperienced actress's first position with a stock company was as leading lady in the theatre in Kostroma, a town in Northern Russia. It was a frustrating but profitable year. Nazimova found the weather uncomfortable and the schedule arduous, but she stayed in Kostroma for one year, playing leading roles in many of the company's productions. The actress later remembered:

> "It was hard work. I had to learn two new plays each week, give two night performances, and rehearse every day. . . . It is true that I had little time for thought to spare for studying and perfecting my parts. It was a feverish grind of work, with only a few hours left for eating and sleeping. But I was building up some things that were worth-while. I was training my memory. I was acquiring a repertoire. And I was learning to think quickly--I who had been so slow and dull as a child."[44]

An article in the Bohemian indicates that during the season at Kostroma Nazimova played from one hundred and fifty to two hundred parts; in addition she had to supply her own costumes.[45]

Moving a step upwards in the Russian theatrical world, Nazimova spent the next season at Kerson. She refused a position at Kazan because she did not feel she was ready.[46] Although the production schedule at Kerson was as strenuous as Kostroma, the quality of the company

was satisfying to Nazimova's desire for amelioration.

The third year of Nazimova's apprenticeship was spent in the town of Vilna, with a company that was one more step up the ladder that the actress had set herself to climb. L'Aiglon was one of the roles that the actress performed in Vilna; some critics compared her performance favorably with Paul Orleneff's interpretation of the great romantic role, which had been first created by Sarah Bernhardt.[47] By the end of her third year spent in Russian stock companies the hard-working Nazimova had learned and performed over two hundred different roles.[48] Evidently the roles she enacted had been incredibly varied.

> "In those three years I learned literally scores of parts. I have played--everything! Shakespeare, Moliere, Hauptmann, Sudermann, Ibsen, the Russian classics. And I have played comedy, even musical comedy, in which I sang and danced."[49]

It is interesting to question whether Nazimova had followed Nemirovitch-Dantchenko's advice when she prepared for her roles. At any rate, as Clifford Ashby notes in his excellent article, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," Nazimova was receiving a wonderful background of training in the theatre, " . . . training that was unknown to the Broadway theatre."[50]

In the informative interview that Nazimova gave Mary Mullett in 1922 we get a glimpse of the actress's

own insight into her state of mind during her third year of acting in Russian stock companies.

> "By the third year the work was not so hard, for already I knew very many of the plays. I mean that literally. I not only knew my own parts in them, but I could go through all the parts."51

In addition, the actress reported that for the first time in her career she had enough time to think about the roles she was performing.

> "And now, at last, I had some time to give to study. While we were putting on plays which I knew, I could give thought to improving my work in another play that was coming, perhaps a month ahead. And I began to read books of all kinds; books that stimulated and enriched my mind."52

The traditional stock company experience was providing Nazimova with a rich background on which she could draw in her later years in the theatre. We may also assume that the year with Stanislavsky and Nemirovitch-Dantchenko had considerably enhanced the young actress's ability to prepare and perform the roles she was playing.

Changing theatres again at the beginning of her fourth season of stock, Nazimova selected a theatre which was very different from the type of theatres in which she had previously performed. The theatre in St. Petersburg in which the actress was to appear during the season of 1903 was the Nemetti. The theatre's new leading lady described the philosophy of her playhouse in her interview with Mary Mullett.

> "Not a theatre for the aristocrats! It was across the river from the best part of the city; a theatre for working people. There is nothing in this country [U.S.A] quite like it. In a way it was educational; a place where we gave serious plays, with a message--a sort of propoganda of new ideas."[53]

That description may have been a little over emphatic because in another article Nazimova listed some of the roles she played at the Nemetti and they do not correspond with the image she gave the theatre. The roles included popular roles, plus opportunities for leading parts in some new plays including L'Aiglon again, Zaza, Camille and Magda.[54] Alexander Kirkland reports that "her greatest successes in this theatre were L'Aiglon, Camille, Nora in A Doll's House, Hilda Wangel in The Master Builder and Rita in Little Eyolf.[55] The Ibsen experience would prove useful later.

By the end of Nazimova's four years of working with various Russian stock companies the actress was evidently ready for yet another change. This time the change was to be more radical. During the year in St. Petersburg the young actress had met, and by some reports, become infatuated with, a prominent Russian actor, Paul Orleneff.[56] Orleneff was the direct instigator of the next phase of Nazimova's apprenticeship in the theatre. The actor was to instigate the formation of the St. Petersburg Players, the group which would expose the actress to a more radical philosophy of theatre, and

eventually take her to the United States.

Paul Orleneff and the St. Petersburg Players.--Numerous articles in American magazines, newspapers and books describe the Russian career of the temperamental young man who joined forces with Nazimova in St. Petersburg and who first appeared on the New York stage in 1905.[57] Particularly valuable is a fine article written by Homer Saint-Gaudens for The Critic and published in 1906. Born in 1869, Orleneff was a young man who decided very early that he wanted a career in the theatre. In 1885, at the age of sixteen, he left home and family and traveled to Moscow where he studied for a year at the Maly Theatre. Making his stage debut in 1886, and spending his early career playing in different theatres in the provinces, Orleneff eventually achieved a measure of success, particularly in comic roles and in farce and vaudeville; his later career, however, indicates that he did not find the comic roles very satisfying.

Orleneff's fortunes changed when Stanislavsky recommended him for the title role in Alexey Tolstoy's drama, Czar Fyodor.[58] The play,

> . . . which had been long prohibited was presented by P. P. Gnedich on October 12, 1898 in the Suvorinsky Theatre. P. N. Orlyonev played the part of Tsar Fyodor with the deliberate intent of giving to the spectacle a direct political meaning.[59]

The Oxford Companion reports that Orleneff's made-up resemblance to Czar Nicholas II caused the play to be

banned again.[60] Two days after Orleneff startled the audiences of St. Petersburg with his interpretation of Czar Fyodor, the Moscow Art Theatre opened its doors with another production of Count Alexey Tolstoy's historical drama.

Fame gave Orleneff greater freedom to direct and act in the plays of his choice, although Saint-Gaudens indicates that the plays he selected were often controversial and that problems with censorship led to several short stays in prison. Kellog Durland points out: "In autocratic Russia, where any display of altruism opens one to the suspicions and even the wrath of the authorities, Mr. Orleneff found slight encouragement."[61]

Described as a thin, wiry, but graceful man, Orleneff was single-mindedly dedicated to his art.[62] He never achieved great fame. Saint-Gaudens states that throughout his career the actor sacrificed financial success in order to achieve his artistic aims. Orleneff held

> . . . seriously to his view that art is but a servant to convey the idea of the man that serves a purpose. Indeed his respect for his work rests so deep that he has restrained himself from his greatest desire, to play Hamlet,--which by the by, he understands as a nervous character, until after his first scene with the ghost--waiting for a time when he may be well fitted to do justice to the part.[63]

Saint-Gaudens' article relates that Orleneff's creative philosophy of theatre won the young actor friendships

with Chekhov, Gorky and Stanislavsky, and eventually led to his production of Karamasoff Brothers and Crime and Punishment in the Art Theatre in Moscow. Later the four men decided to form a national theatre. Orleneff started touring the country with a production of The Chosen People in order to gain enough funds to start the theatre. The censors refused to allow performances of the play, and so Orleneff was forced to take Gorky's advice and transfer the production to Europe.

In 1904 Orleneff led a group of Russian actors, the St. Petersburg Players, to Europe and, then, the United States. Alla Nazimova was the leading actress in the company. The tour was a financial failure and the company was forced to return to Russia after two abortive years, although Orleneff did lead another company to America in 1912. The actor spent the last years of his life touring the Russian provinces and acting in factories and on collective farms. He died in 1932.

Orleneff's life-long dream was a theatre modeled on the Moscow Art Theatre--a theatre for the people--where he could present modern classics enacted by a company of superior actors trained in a realistic style of acting. Unfortunately for Orleneff, this dream never became a reality, although most critics considered his skill approached that of a genius of the theatre.

> Orlieneff is a restless soul. The restriction of working in one theatre would irk him too much. And so he is one of the few foot-loose players of great ability in Russia. Occasionally he leases a theatre for a short period and settles down, and then he is off again, up and down the provinces. . . . Orlieneff himself is an actor of very great talent if not of genius. But his vagabond ways are disastrous to the unity of his company and the perfection of the ensemble.[64]

Nazimova presumably met Orleneff in 1903, and evidently the two artists of the theatre immediately became at least friends. Most reports indicate that the mutual admiration was romantic as well as intellectual. Bodeen indicates: "Nazimova and he fell madly in love, and were married."[65] It is almost certain that they lived together until Orleneff took the St. Petersburg Players back to Russia and Nazimova remained in the United States. Bodeen, who knew the actress in her later years in Hollywood, gives a vivid description of the young actors at the time of their meeting.

> He was 36; she 25. As a pair the two were more than doubly temperamental and stormy. Physically they were not unalike--thin, small in stature, wiry but graceful, blessed with huge, expressive long-lashed eyes that were a chameleon blue.[66]

The meeting of Orleneff and Nazimova probably came shortly before the formation of the St. Petersburg Players and the decision to flee Russia to take Chirikov's The Chosen People to countries with less censorship than Russia.

Nazimova told Mary Mullett that it was the failure of Orleneff's grand dream which led the actor to flee

Russia.[67] According to her report, the break came when the actor-director was refused permission to perform the pro-Jewish play The Chosen People, " . . . which portrays all the horrors of the pogram or massacre, the chief staple of Russian news dispatches."[68] Nazimova states that Orleneff wanted to produce the play to counterbalance a successful anti-Jewish play entitled The Contra Bandists.[69] Ashby gives an additional explanation of the reasons for the tour.

> Most of the publicity at the time of the tour stated that Orleneff's decision to leave Russia was motivated by his distaste for the restrictions imposed upon drama by the government censor, but it seems probable that the major impetus came from the enforced closing of the theatres following the Moscow riots of 1904.[70]

Ashby also states, contrary to most of the 1904 publicity, that the St. Petersburg Players probably did not exist prior to their trip to Berlin.[71]

Once formed, the St. Petersburg Players traveled first to Berlin to perform The Chosen People with Orleneff and Nazimova performing the leading roles. Critical reports indicate that the production was well received, particularly by the large Russian colony.[72] Their next stop was London's Haymarket Theatre, where the play was described as didactic, although the acting of Nazimova and Orleneff was singled out for special favorable comment.

The trip to London indirectly led to the

company's tour of the United States. It also established the precedent of patronage, which would immeasurably assist the future career of the St. Petersburg Players. Homer Saint-Gaudens described the subsidy which initiated the trip to New York.

> Prince Kroptkin and the Russian Refugees became interested, and proposed a trip to America at a dinner given to the actors in co-operation with Sir Henry Irving, Beerbohm Tree, Jerome K. Jerome, Lawrence Irving, Ellen Terry and other theatrical folk. The plan ripened so rapidly that in 1905 Orleneff sailed for the United States with the whole of his cast.73

The St. Petersburg Players gave their first performance in the United States at the Herald Square Theatre in New York City on March 23, 1905. The play was The Chosen People. The American audience for a pro-Jewish play, performed in Russian, would seem to be limited to Russians and Jews; but the favorable reviews given the rather naturalistic style of acting led to a larger audience than would have been expected.

Realism had reached the American theatre in 1905 with the box set, the realistic playwriting of James A. Herne and Clyde Fitch, and the work of David Belasco; but it had hardly penetrated the ranks of the acting profession. Leading American actors at the time were Robert Mantell, William Gillette, Mrs. Fiske, Julia Marlowe, and Maude Adams; only Gillette employed a style which could be considered at all realistic. Undoubtedly American actors would have developed a more natural style

of acting without the influence of the performances of the St. Petersburg Players and Nazimova's later performances in English. In 1905, however, the Russian acting style was rather revolutionary, and the actors refreshingly simple approach to their roles certainly must have been one of the reasons for the undoubted success of the foreign company.

The New York Times reported that the "naturalistic acting of the players from St. Petersburg"[74] was extremely pleasing to observe. The play was judged "briliantly interpreted," and Nazimova was singled out for special praise for her "inspired performance."[75] The new company had arrived and it had favorably impressed both critics and audiences.

Following up on their success in the Yiddish and English papers, the company then repaired to a small theatre on the East Side of New York, an area which was heavily people with Russians and Jews. Entitling their theatre Orleneff's Russian Lyceum, the company proceeded to present a repertory season of the classics of the modern European theatre.

Actually, during their two-year stay in the United States of America the St. Petersburg Players appear to have performed a surprising number of different plays. Durland reports that the repertory included, besides The Chosen People, Chekhov's Uncle Vanya, Gorky's

Children of the Night and Night Refuge, Ibsen's Ghosts, The Master Builder, The Enemy of the People and Hedda Gabler. Hauptmann was represented by The Sunken Bell, Michael Kramer and Lonely Souls, and the playwright Herman Behr completed Durland's list with The Apostle.[76] In addition, Chicago reviewers reported performances of Zaza, The Sea Gull, Revisor, Orleneff's revolutionary interpretation of Czar Fyodor, and The Star.

Despite critical acclaim, misfortune followed misfortune for the young company. Evidently the major problem stemmed from Orleneff's temperamental unsuitability as a manager.

> Orleneff was temperamentally unsuited to manage a theatre, and the record of his failure in the face of every opportunity is almost unbelievable. Subscriptions were raised by the Jewish community; society's Mrs. Whitney arranged a series of benefit matinees at the Criterion; theatre folk such as Ben Greet, Paul Herzog, and Charles Klein attempted to bring order to the company's affairs; Andrew Carnegie and J. P. Morgan made personal donations; Dan Frohman arranged a tour of Chicago and Boston. But all of these efforts met with the same results: hungry actors, importunate creditors and general dissatisfaction.[78]

The St. Petersburg Players should have succeeded with all the help they got, but somehow Orleneff could not make the theatre pay. The money did not come in. In Orleneff's memoirs he remarks that they often left the theatre with suitcases filled with money.[79] But the money was not spent wisely. Saint-Gaudens describes the following incident which appears to be typical of the

two-year misadventure.

> Their ignorance of American business methods led them to sign a disadvantageous contract for the East Third Street Theatre, which proved small, noisy from an assembly hall overhead, with a crowded stage and bad ventilation.[80]

By December of 1905 the group was almost destitute, and that was not the first time. During the summer of 1905 the anarchist, Emma Goldman, heard that Orleneff and Nazimova were stranded; she invited the pair to join her camp on an island in Pelham Bay, near New York City. "A close friendship soon sprung up between the actor and his hostess. Convinced that Orleneff was an artist of genius, Emma helped him to get established, became his interpretor, and at his urging, his manager." Miss Goldman went on tour with the company to Chicago, where Orleneff gave a benefit to help her start a magazine called <u>The Open Road</u>.[81]

The December, 1905 crisis was solved when "a ladies committee provided immediate funds as the actors were starving."[82] By this time the company was losing approximately $3000 a month, and the Yiddish Press had withdrawn its "notices" after a rumored quarrel with Orleneff.[83] Further help came in the form of benefit performances in January at the Criterion Theatre, sponsored by some of the wealthy people in New York City. One benefit performance of <u>Ghosts</u>, given on January 9, 1906, was sponsored by Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney, Mrs.

John Jacob Astor, and Mrs. W. K. Vanderbilt and the like.[84] In this performance Nazimova played Regina rather than Mrs. Alving. She felt that this would permit Orleneff to stand out as Oswald, a part she considered one of his best.[85] Another benefit sponsored by Edward Wharton, Edgerton Winthrop, Mrs. Vanderbilt, J. J. Astor, Mrs. Whitney and Richard Watson Gilder, occured on January 16 at a matinee performance of The Chosen People.

As indicated by the Emma Goldman incident, the company did not continually remain in New York City. Trips to Boston and Chicago were arranged under the auspices of Daniel Frohman, who assigned Augustus Dunlap to manage the company upon their return from the tour. Saint-Gaudens' article in The Critic, written in early 1906, predicted that the company would remain in the United States, "and spend the remainder of the 1907 winter in New York."[87] Long before that, however, Orleneff and the company had returned to Russia, leaving Nazimova behind to learn English.

Those two unstable years with the Orleneff company were probably rather miserable for Nazimova, even though she was continually acclaimed by the critics. The poverty of the company is described in many of the articles written about their years in America. Nazimova told of throwing her shoes into her apartment to frighten the rats away;[88] and a friend of Eugene O'Neill

reported that the company could not even afford the nickel pack of cigarettes they needed for the performance of one of their plays.[89]

At one point during her stay with the St. Petersburg Players Nazimova became so miserable that she returned to her homeland, although Orleneff convinced her to return by claiming that he had leased a new theatre. One version of the events leading up to Nazimova's trip back to Russia is given in a unidentified newspaper clipping in the H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection of documents on Nazimova in the Library of Congress Film Department.

> Orleneff promised Nazimova he would not drink and even appointed a body guard to watch over him. When he and the body guard came to the theatre drunk Nazimova walked out and rode the elevated all night and there was no performance. She went back to Russia but returned when Orleneff said that wealthy Americans were building a theatre. When she returned it was a room over an East Side saloon.[90]

Throughout the two years the St. Petersburg Players performed in the United States they did receive good reviews. Criticism generally favored the rather new acting style employed by the actors, and both Nazimova and Orleneff were invariably praised for the excellence of their portrayals. The following review, which appeared in Cosmopolitan in 1906, is typical of the overall critical response to the plays and performers.

> Both in their choice of plays and in the manner of interpretation this organization clearly represents the most advanced conception of the drama, their

> radical ideas, having, in fact, been partially responsible for their coming to this country.[91]

Many of the critics were especially impressed with the naturalism and simplicity of the performances they were viewing. The New York Globe added to its description of the naturalism a glowing review of Orleneff's clear delineation of Oswald in Ghosts.

> Seldom do we see such a good example of the quiet natural and polished variety of playing as this company presents. Charming simplicity, together with great art and a peculiar appreciation of the divine fitness of things, stamps M. Orleneff's Oswald as a truly great piece of acting.[92]

Another review demonstrates the continual critical emphasis upon the difference in style between the Russian and American actors.

> Strangely, though felicitously to Broadway eyes, Orleneff has schooled his followers with a naturalistic curb that produces a supple, intense effect, which wholly lacks the more exaggerated methods of our theatre. Before all an American feels grateful for the artistic sincerity which fills their dramatic climaxes with an imagination divorced from the brutality of treatment.[93]

The same reviewer praised Orleneff's restraint in performing Ibsen.

> The imagination, and yet restraint of his easy personality may be typified in such a scene as that in the last act of Ghosts where Oswald childishly begs his mother for the sun. There the Russian's business, always to the point, with a realism based on naturalism produces a spiritual quality at variance with the usually dreaded horror of the moment.[94]

Evidently the strenuous years working in the Russian stock companies stood Nazimova in good stead

because the young actress, even though handling many jobs in the St. Petersburg Players, still had enough energy left to give superlative performances. Ironically, Nazimova's name was accidently left off the program of the opening performance of The Chosen People at the Herald Square Theatre, but she still was noticed by the critics.[95] Arthur Ruhl later remembered:

> . . . that night down on the East Side . . . when the half starved band of Russian adventurers played The Chosen People before a stuffy hall full of weeping Russian Jews.
>
> Orleneff was the star then and we could only wonder who that girl with the wonderful dark eyes might be, who, as he poured out the revolutionists story, flung herself over the back of a chair and stared out at the imaginary city roofs under which so many crimes were being committed against her people.[96]

Alan Dale, too, had strong visual images of the young actress's first performance in the United States.

> I loved the way she wept in The Chosen People. Our emotional actresses weep from their temples and their foreheads. Afraid to ruin their makeup. Nazimova shed her tears from her eyes, mopped them with a handkerchief, and at the end of her grief, she actually had a red nose.[97]

Her performance in The Sea Gull was described by Owen Johnson in June, 1907.

> . . . she came tripping on the stage, a timid and frightened child, making awkward half-curtsies, giving her hand with a sudden bashful movement, each gesture cramped and lacking the freedom of a woman. Her figure was unformed; she seemed afraid of even her own charms, was alarmed at the impulses of life within her, and lived in a world of illusions and vague romance.[98]

Perhaps because most American critics could not understand the Russian language spoken in all the productions of the St. Petersburg Players, descriptions of Nazimova's acting generally emphasized her versatility and her power to communicate her emotional involvement to the audience, rather than concentrating on analyzing the specific roles she had portrayed. A typical description of the actress's Russian speaking performances was given in Homer Saint-Gaudens article, "The Russian Players."

> In such roles as Zaza, as Hilda in The Master Builder, as Regina in Ghosts, or as Leah in The Chosen People, she brings forward her instinct for character and her subtle power of expression. She becomes convincing, interesting, appealing as her need requires, yet she never arouses the fear that she will make a clown of herself. She acts without apparent theatricalism, where her dramatic sense never overmasters her common sense.[99]

Forman, like many other critics, praised the actress for her versatility. "Each role she enacted with a finish, a consumate skill, that made her audience marvel,"[100] a note which would be sounded again and again in Nazimova's later career. Even in those early performances in Russian the critics were pleased to see an actress who was willing and able to appear totally different in each role she essayed. The critic from Cosmopolitan, Christian Brinton, lauded:

> So plastic is her personality and so supreme are her powers of identification, that it would be hazardous to say in what part Madame Nazimov [sic]

> excels. Her accurate transition from the conscious coquetry and pathetic ardor of Zaza to the eerie poetry of Hilda is alone sufficient to prove her an actress of consummate versatility and charm.[101]

Current Literature's reviewer agreed as he delineated Nazimova's ability to express "by play of feature and of body and by the communicating enticement and the communicating power . . . if not the Russian words, at least the emotions and moods behind."[102]

The actress herself was performing many duties other than those of just acting in the St. Petersburg Players. Various interviews indicate that the young actress was kept busy designing and supervising the building of costumes, writing Russian translations of all the Ibsen productions in the repertory, composing and arranging all the music, directing the rehearsals and arranging all the business affairs. While all this work sounds excessive, it seems possible in light of Orleneff's undoubted failings as a theatre manager. Nazimova later told Ada Patterson:

> When I came to this country with Orleneff we brought poor players with us. I worked with them, filled them with the spirit of ambition to do their best, trained them, coached them, taught them to think as their character thought, and when we gave our plays the critics said of the company "What excellent actors." They were not excellent actors. They were bad.[103]

In fact, other than Orleneff and Nazimova, the actors in the St. Petersburg Players were rarely singled out for special notice. Critics were much more likely to focus

upon the excellence of the ensemble work. For instance, James Huneker felt that "the company generally was excellent,"[104] while Theatre described them as the "brilliant Russian Players."[105]

At the end of the disastrous two-year tour of the United States by the St. Petersburg Players, one last subscription performance was given to raise enough money to send the company back to their native land. Orleneff's grand dream had failed primarily owing to his inability to manage the company successfully. Nazimova's apprenticeship in the theatre had ended. Within a year she would be a "star," and she would be alone.

What had Nazimova learned from Paul Orleneff? This seems an important consideration because at least two well-known critics later remarked that Nazimova's work went into a decline the further away from Orleneff she got. In his book The Russian Theatre, published in 1922, Oliver Sayler remarked:

> It is apparent to everyone in America now, as it was clear to many at the time, that his was the flame that lit up those early performances of Ibsen by Nazimova in this country. The farther the actress got from her preceptor and the roles he had taught her, the more artificial she became.[106]

Sayler's opinion may have been endorsed by James Huneker. He was so impressed by Nazimova's performances in Russian that years later he remarked that the actress had been " . . . at her artistic best while playing in

Russian."[107]

Most critics remember Orleneff as a brilliant, but flawed man. Oliver Sayler described Orleneff as "an actor's actor, whose career was considerably hindered by restlessness, a disorderly life, and a tendency to too much drinking."[108] Slonim reports a similar tale.

> A man of enormous drive, he was afflicted by almost pathological nervousness and alternated periods of great elation with depression and drinking. . . . [He] led a disorderly life and roamed like a gypsy through the regions of Russia.[109]

Hapgood, sounding a slightly different note, states, "He is a free lance. He must act what is possessing his imagination, and at the times that he feels the impulse."[110] While reports of his restless nature are almost universal, Orleneff was undoubtedly a brilliant man of the theatre, " . . . an extraordinary actor who was also known as a wild kind of revolutionary."[111]

A study of Orleneff's work provides at least six possible ways in which the actor-director could have influenced Alla Nazimova. The possibility of this influence is greatly enhanced by Nazimova's belief in his skill. She called him, "The greatest actor in Russia, . . . a man of real genius."[112]

First of all, working with Paul Orleneff undoubtedly reinforced the dual training that Nazimova had received under the tutelage of Stanislavsky and Nemirovitch-Dantchenko. The duality included technical control and

inner development of character. Sayler later described Orleneff as follows: "As a trainer of actors, he is named in the next rank after Stanislavsky."[113] Ashby reinforces this by stating that Orleneff was "a man imbued with the realistic spirit of the Moscow Art Theatre . . . [he] believed theatre must mirror reality . . . each action must be true to life."[114] Orleneff demonstrated his concern with reality by visiting prisons before he produced Crime and Punishment and by visiting hospitals before his production of Ghosts. Orleneff's critics suggest that he was a great teacher and that he believed in establishing the inner reality of each part he portrayed. Such an approach would certainly be valuable to Nazimova in her later career.

Orleneff also presumably strengthened the technical training endorsed by both the Moscow Philharmonic Society Dramatic School and the Moscow Art Theatre. Orleneff's years on the vaudeville stage must have given him a tremendous technical skill to counterbalance his " . . . insistence on the psychological note."[115] Slonim additionally reports that "critics spoke of uncanny intuition, but he worked to polish parts technically."[116] Orleneff was commended for his excellent body control. "He grasps the power of acting with deliberation and the strength of keeping still,"[117] an ability which Nazimova would use to great effect throughout her career. It

seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that working with Orleneff intensified Nazimova's technical skill and body control.

Secondly, Orleneff was famed for his innovative interpretations of the roles he essayed.

> He studies the characters he interprets and is not afraid to introduce startling innovations if his investigations lead him to conclusions contrary to those of the playwright. We have heard of creative criticism. Paul Orleneff is a champion of creative acting . . . . He acts not only with his body, but with his brain.[118]

This description of the actor is echoed in the remarks of Hutchins Hapgood of Collier's, written after viewing and interviewing Orleneff during his performances in the United States in 1912. "He is an artist, rather than an actor, in that he actively interprets and creates, rather than portrays."[119] In light of Nazimova's "creative interpretations" of the roles she portrayed in English on the American stage and in films, one could presume that the artist was influenced by her observations of Orleneff's method of working up a part.

Thirdly, Nazimova may have been influenced by Orleneff's undoubted skill "as an interpretor of extreme and pathological characters."[120] Christian Brinton remarked that the actor's "colleagues particularly commend his elaborate pathological portrait of the Tsar Feodor."[121] The critic himself found the actor equally appealing as Oswald in Ghosts or as Raskolnikov in

Crime and Punishment, both of which could be considered "pathological" characters. Saint-Gaudens was deeply moved by Orleneff's performance in The Master Builder. He stated that the actor "discriminates between the varying stages of madness of Halvard Solness in a way that holds an audience half of whom are ignorant of his speech."[122] Throughout Nazimova's career she shone in portrayals of pathological or morbid characters, as demonstrated by her success as Hedda Gabler, Madame Ranevsky in The Cherry Orchard and even as Christine in Mourning Becomes Electra.

Closely related to his skill with pathological characters is Orleneff's dedication to the modern classics of the European theatre, a fourth way in which Nazimova presumably benefited from her exposure to Paul Orleneff. The actor "adored Ibsen,"[123] and certainly Nazimova's early successes on the American stage came with her performances of that great playwright's heroines. In fact, her last great success in the theatre came with her illuminating portrayal of Mrs. Alving in Ghosts. Durland reports that Orleneff sacrificed a lucrative career on the Russian vaudeville stage in order to devote himself to the classics of the Russian and European theatre.[124] Throughout her career Nazimova excelled at the classics and in her later years was extremely scathing of her early association with popular drama in both film and

theatre.

Christian Brinton's evaluation of Orleneff described the actor as "unquestionably one of the finest exponents of tense, concentrated histrionic emotion who has ever visited our shores."[125] This could be considered a fifth way in which Orleneff influenced his leading lady in the St. Petersburg Players. The description of Orleneff given by Brinton would seem equally well suited to Nazimova in her intense performance of Hedda Gabler, or almost any of her other Ibsen women.

Finally, it may be assumed that Nazimova benefited from exposure to Orleneff's methods of training the actors in his company. He must have been a very demanding worker. Kirkland describes the actor's <u>modus operandi</u>.

> When at work upon the lines of a play he walks restlessly to and fro hour after hour. He can apply himself almost unbrokenly from 15 hours a day, and what he demands of himself he expects of the other members of his company. He is intolerant of slipshod work. A realist in the truest sense, yet a realist of polish and finesse. Each action must be to the life. Every word and syllable spoken correctly. As a manager he drives his people furiously.[126]

In later years Nazimova demanded the same kind of work from actors in her production of <u>Ghosts</u>. Harry Ellerbe stated: "She was a taskmaster and relentless on her actors until she achieved the desired result. Many actors withdrew from her company because they could not take the pressure."[127]

The money raised at the last subscription performance took the members of the St. Petersburg Players back to Russia minus one of their members. Alla Nazimova had been offered a five year contract with Lee Shubert, on the condition that she learned to perform in the English language. Nazimova never worked with Paul Orleneff again. However, it appears that the two years spent in his company had been extremely profitable to the burgeoning star. Orleneff was a flawed man, but his theatrical genius had touched her soul.

Interim Spent Learning English

The contract which kept Nazimova in the United States while the St. Petersburg Players returned to Russia was with Lee Shubert and Henry Miller. They agreed to manage her and produce her plays if she learned to speak and perform in English. Nazimova's contract with Shubert and Miller was brought to fruition, according to the actress,[128] through the kind offices of Richard Watson Gilder and Robert Underwood Johnson, the editors of Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine. Gilder's enthusiastic response to Nazimova's performances in Russian led the editor to ask his sister to see the actress perform. The sister, Jeanette Gilder, was so impressed by Nazimova's work that she arranged an interview for the actress with Lee Shubert, although the interview had to be conducted in French with Owen Johnson

serving as translator. The interview led to the contract.

In the 1930s a controversy arose regarding the roles that Miller and Shubert had played in introducing the actress to America. Frank Morse, in his book Backstage with Henry Miller, claimed that Henry Miller "was the man who did most to bring Nazimova into the consciousness of playgoing New York in the first decade of the century."[129] Lee Shubert, who disagreed with Morse, wrote a letter to the New York Sun asserting the primary importance of his role in establishing the actress, claiming that Miller had been under contract to him at the time of Nazimova's debut. Morse replied to Shubert in another letter to the Sun. He stated that at the time of the debut Miller had been a producer in his own right, even though he had once worked for Shubert. Morse went on to point out that the original New York Sun advertisement for Nazimova's debut read: "Henry Miller presents the famous Russian actress . . . Mme. Alla Nazimova,"[130] although he admitted that Lee Shubert was a one-third owner of the Henry Miller Company and that "he and Miller utilized a Shubert printed form for Mme. Nazimova's contract."[131]

Nazimova herself wrote a letter to the New York Sun to try to settle the altercation. After crediting Gilder and Underwood with her discovery she wrote:

> Lee Shubert was always too modest to claim credit for giving my five year contract to a pig in a poke. To him, then, my salute for taking a gambler's chance but also everlasting gratitude for never interfering with my artistic freedom. . . . thank you, Mr. M. 132

According to William Brady, even if Miller and Shubert had not signed the actress, he would have been willing to sponsor her. Grace George, Brady's wife, had spotted the arresting young performer. She took her husband down to a tiny second-floor theatre off Second Avenue to see Orleneff and Nazimova perform Ibsen. Brady later stated: "I didn't sign Nazimova, as it happened, because somebody had already spotted her for Henry Miller and he was just twenty-four hours ahead of me."[133]

Nazimova had a contract, but her first obligation was to learn to speak the English language. The actress told Mary Mullett an amusing story about the first word she had learned to speak in English. The incident occurred aboard the steamer coming into New York.

> "I was desperately ill, and the stewardess, coming up to my stateroom, looked at me and said briefly, 'Seasick!' I moaned, 'Non! mal de mer!' 'Seasick!' she reiterated; and thus I had my first lesson in English."[134]

This story, apocryphal or no, is typical of the charming anecdotes which made Nazimova a popular subject for interviews as soon as she became a star. In fact, there is even another version.

> It was Ellen Terry who taught me my first English words. I was to acknowledge applause during a benefit performance in London. The words were "Dees ees dee proudest day of my live. I tank you varry moch. Goud blezz you."[135]

According to most reports Nazimova never learned to speak English without an accent. Henry Miller's biography includes a description of the educational process she employed.

> The first and most difficult detail of the plan had been to teach her English within a drastic time limit. Miller engaged Mrs. Caroline Harris, an expert on stage requirements, for the role of instructress. By sheer hard work, aided by her fluency in French and German as well as Russian, the actress picked up in a hot room at the old Judson Hotel in Washington Square between June 21 and September 8, 1906 a fair command of the language and an English pronunciation adequate at least for the role of Hedda.[136]

The actress herself gave the following report of her English lessons in an interview she had with a reporter for Theatre in 1907.

> She [Caroline Harris] is a little actress who has not been fortunate. . . . But she spoke beautiful English. Every day she came to me and stayed with me three or four hours. We talked and read. There was no grammar. It was all conversation or reading books and magazines and newspapers. It was not very hard. I have a remarkable memory for form, and once I see a word I never forget it. For eight months I studied English thus. I lived in this family hotel among Americans. I avoided all Russians, for I did not want to hear the hard accent of Northern Russia. I wanted to forget it.[137]

By 1912, however, Nazimova did not remember that the English lessons had been quite so easy. She told Acton Davies:

> I passed through many months of black despair because I did not see how I could ever master the idioms of your language. It was only when I cut myself off from all my Russian friends, from all my Russian books that I could make the very least little bit of headway.[138]

Nazimova did manage to learn English. In her first performances most critics felt that her command of the language was excellent. In addition, Alan Dale was amazed by her backstage conversational ability. "There is no weak spot in Nazimova's off-stage English. She can discuss any topic easily and rhythmically, and she is never at a loss for a word."[139] Unfortunately, however, the actress was never able to perform in English without an accent, which considerably limited the roles in which she could be cast. Nazimova's problems seemed to lie in misplaced stresses on words and a rather Russian intonation pattern. Two articles, both written in 1907, give an indication of the nature of the problem which would cast a shadow on Nazimova's entire career. An article in Harper's Weekly declared:

> There are times when the English she has learned runs quite away with the English she thoroughly understands. This, at times, renders her delivery of many lines, particularly in tense, impassioned scenes, almost unintelligible.[140]

A reviewer from Current Literature offered the following opinion.

> At first it was difficult, at times, to follow her. While her pronunciation was faultless, she invariably misplaced her stresses. Even today her intonations still have an obvious but not offensive accent, and by a kind of fatality she still misplaces now and then a significant syllable in a

word or the significant word in a phrase.[141]

In her interview with Mary Mullet, Nazimova disclosed the details of her original contract with Lee Shubert. The actress was to receive $50 a week while learning English, $100 a week for the rest of the year 1906, $175 a week for the next year, $250 for the third year, and $350 for the fourth and fifth years.[142]

After Nazimova had learned English and begun to earn $100 a week, a decision had to be made. A play had to be selected for her debut performance in English. The actress's letter to the New York Sun describes the method by which a solution to that dilemma was reached.

> After Henry Miller, general director for Shubert, had submitted a melodrama, Miss Pocohontas and similar incomprehensible vehicles for my debut I told Lee Shubert in unmistakable American that unless I played and directed Hedda Gabler me go home.[143]

Nazimova's play selection was inspired, but ironically the predicament that led up to the selection would continually reappear and frustrate the actress for the rest of her career in the theatre.

In fact there were several limitations which confined Nazimova in her selection of roles. They remained constant throughout her career, even though, as she herself stated, she often attempted to override them.

> A role that is the most unsuited to me is the one I love the best. I throw myself into the character, I make myself be the person.[144]

The factors which endured throughout Nazimova's career as a theatrical artist were several. First, she always had a slight Russian accent. Lawrence Langner stated in 1951 that "Nazimova's voice never lost its Russian flavor."[145] This fact considerably limited the roles she could effectively portray.

> She realized as fully as anyone that her striking foreign appearance and the numerous imperfections of her speech prohibit her choice of normal, native American drama in which she would be called upon to attempt the impersonation of a normal American type.[146]

Second, by training and inclination Nazimova was an actress who performed more effectively in serious drama than in comedy. The plays of Henrik Ibsen brought the actress great success, as did Russian dramatists like Chekhov and Turgenev, but these great dramatists have never drawn large enough audiences to the theatre to make them suitable for frequent productions on Broadway. A dramatic actress with a Russian accent is hard to cast. She said it herself.

> "I must be very difficult to cast. For me it has to be a foreigner or a translation. But I haven't seen hardly [sic] anything in recent years that I really would have wanted to play. . . . I've wanted so to find new plays."[147]

Hedda Gabler was scheduled for four matinee performances at the Princess Theatre. As Frank Morse remarked:

> It is probable that Miller [and Shubert] underestimated the young Russian's possibilities. He saw her advertising value. . . . His schemc was to "make her a teacup and saucer success." . . . Miller felt reasonably sure that the women of New York, if their interest in the stranger was sufficiently aroused, would flock to the Princess Theatre.[148]

Rehearsals began with a carefully selected cast, and in a few weeks the play was ready for an audience. Alla Nazimova, a twenty-seven year old Russian actress, was about to perform the play which would introduce her talents to the English-speaking stage.

Nazimova's Acting Theories

The Nazimova who rose to stardom on the American stage in 1906 had a unique background. She had studied acting at the Moscow Philharmonic Society Dramatic School and the Moscow Art Theatre, served apprenticeship in Russian stock companies in Kostroma, Kerson, Vilna and St. Petersburg, and spent two years working with the talented Paul Orleneff and his St. Petersburg Players. The ten years of training proved invaluable. When Nazimova started performing in English on the American stage her acting style was immediately acclaimed unique. It was so unusual that "New York critics . . . began dissecting the style of this newcomer with all the enthusiasm of entomologists examining a new kind of bug."[149]

Although Nazimova's skill as a performer was not as highly revered during her years in vaudeville and

films, her return to stardom in the late 1920s and 1930s brought another enthusiastic generation of critics to interview the actress and to try to describe her acting technique. The material written by critics describing and analyzing Nazimova's acting is supplemented by several articles written by the actress herself; especially valuable is an article on Nazimova in Morton Eustis' book Players at Work. This body of work permits a careful examination of the way the actress prepared to perform a role.

Nazimova, whom Rouben Mamoulian described as an "intuitive actress,"[150] sketched for Eustis the procedure she employed to develop a part prior to the start of the rehearsal period. The actress believed that "the actor should be an instrument played upon by the character he depicts."[151] In order to let this happen Nazimova first read the play aloud several times. During one of those readings, "She lets herself go, forgets about technique and allows the emotion of the play to carry her where it will."[152] After this emotional reading Eustis reports that Nazimova went back over the play in minute detail and noted the places where "the emotions had flowed freely and naturally."[153] These instinctive reactions were then analyzed to determine their cause, because the actress was determined to "try with each characterization to be exactly that sort of person, with no touch of any other

role visible."[154]

Once this inner understanding of the character had begun to develop Nazimova believed that "the breeze which stirs the player must sift from the character, through the player's brain, his imagination and his body."[155] Thus Nazimova tried to find out more about the women she portrayed by ascertaining what "her inner response is, her feeling, when some other character is holding the stage."[156] The actress emphasized that imagination was a necessity during the process of creating a believable character. "Imagination kindles the feelings, steers the actor through the character into emotion, enables him to reproduce feelings he himself has never experienced."[157]

In an article which appeared in Equity Magazine Nazimova gave another description of the way she approached a role before rehearsals began.

> I read the play without any special attention to my own part six or seven times. I think not at all of my own part, but always of the plot and the central theme and the play of the characters upon each other. Having gotten this concept of her well defined, I think of her character as she speaks of it herself and as it is disclosed by what she says. Then I get further into the part by reading what she says herself, not with a view to learning my lines, but with getting acquainted with her.[158]

In addition, Nazimova noted that she found it difficult to play a part that she had seen another actress perform. "Always I visualize the actress as I have seen her play

the role, and I cannot bring myself to a belief that it belongs to me."[159] In Actors on Acting Nazimova gives further insight into the process she used to develop her characters.

> An actor must never see himself in character. I study the woman, I look at her under a magnifying glass and say to myself: "Is she right? Is she logical? Is she true to herself? Can I act that woman? Can I make myself into her?"
>
> I am nothing. I am nobody. I have to reconstruct my whole self into this woman I am to portray--speak with her voice, laugh with her laughter--move with her motion. But if you can see the person as a living creature, quite removed from yourself you can work objectively to adapt yourself to the part.[160]

Alexander Kirland reported that, once the rehearsal period commenced, Nazimova was "an indefatigable worker, creating new aspects of the parts each day."[161] This statement is echoed by Eva Le Gallienne, who even used the same word.

> What a splendid worker she is! It was indeed an inspiration to act with her. She is indefatigable in her search for just the right touch, the right nuance. She is never satisfied, never pleased with herself; always looking forward to playing "better the next time."[162]

Katherine Roberts of Collier's stated that the search for the right touch made Nazimova "invariably miserable" during the rehearsal period.[163]

Morton Eustis contends that Nazimova "has such a clear picture of the character in her mind by the first rehearsal that, except for the lines, she feels she could give almost a finished performance."[164] This assertion

was reinforced by the director Rouben Mamoulian, who declared that at the first rehearsal for Turgenev's A Month in the Country, Nazimova gave the best first reading he had ever heard.[165]

Nazimova did not learn her lines until quite late in the rehearsal period. In fact,

> . . . almost the last thing Nazimova does is to memorize the words. Sometimes she does not even know them at the dress rehearsal. She is so immersed in the study and delineation of character that the sides , as such are of secondary importance. Moreover she feels that if a part is written correctly, the dialogue will spring so naturally from the characterization that it will almost learn itself. "Once the actor knows everything there is to know about a character's thoughts--far more, even than the author--he should grasp the vocabulary almost instinctively."[166]

Two revealing articles report that Nazimova suffered from stage fright, even after she had performed a role many times. Arthur Hopkins, who directed Nazimova in a repertory season of Ibsen in 1918, stated:

> To this day she has not recovered from stage fright. I have seen her in the wings ten minutes before her first entrance in a part she had played many times suffering such torture of anticipation as to make none of it worth-while. . . . On the stage she quickly recovered, but the knowledge that this would invariably happen was of no use to her in subsequent performances.[167]

The second article was written by the critic Francine Markel. Shortly after performing in Mourning Becomes Electra, Nazimova told the newspaper woman,

> Early in my career my premiere performance of a play was always a horrible nightmare. I would think of it for weeks. As the years passed on,

> that acute feeling of horror has vanished, but even today, upon stepping out on the stage, I often experience such thoughts as: "Suppose I should stumble and fall flat! Maybe I have forgotten my wig! Yes and my heart sometimes thumps wildly and I even tremble."[168]

In various interviews during her career, Nazimova gave several revealing statements about her attitude when actually performing a role. She told Ada Patterson:

> Please do not think I am posing when I tell you that it does not matter to me how they [the other actors in the play] act. I act alone. My imagination pictures the way they should be acting, and I respond in my playing to that conception. . . .
>
> So far as the influence of the other actors is concerned I play absolutely alone. I and my imagination are sufficient. But it is hard, O very.[169]

In addition, the actress told the Chicago Tribune critic Mae Tinee that while she was on the stage she did not live her part.[170] This statement, however, seems to be contradicted by the description Nazimova gave Louis De Foe of her behavior when she stepped on the stage to perform.

> I am never quite certain of what I am going to do. I try to lose my whole personality in the characters I portray, to be swept along with them, to suffer with them, to feel every emotion of joy and sorrow they express.[171]

De Foe reported that he believed Nazimova's statement because he had seen a performance where the uncertainty of the actress's fellow performers bore out her remarks. In later years Lawrence Langner similarly described the changes that Nazimova made in performance from evening to evening.[172]

The reason for the changes that Nazimova made in her performance from evening to evening may be found in the following quotation from the Eustis article in Players at Work.

> Once the pattern of a role is established Nazimova follows that pattern absolutely in performance. Often, however, it is four or five weeks after the opening before she can say to herself with confidence: "Now I have my pattern." Until then, she is constantly experimenting, playing a scene softer, louder, more harshly; digging into the role, dissecting it until she is sure that it is right.[173]

One may perhaps assume that Nazimova always gave her best performances when she was working with plays written by skilled playwrights, particularly those written by Ibsen and the Russian masters. The complaints about her mannerisms, changes in performance from night to night and posing generally surfaced when the actress was performing in poorly written plays or in her silent films which she never liked. Alexander Kirkland stated,

> Her acting technique was naturalistic to an extreme, illuminating from within a character and its psychological depths. (Her duality later led her to play certain superficial parts from the opposite technical pole: mimetically, with a prodigious command of exterior delineation.) But, at her truest, the theatre was a religion to Nazimova, the play a sermon.[174]

Finally, before moving on to a discussion of Nazimova's first performance in English on the American stage, it seems appropriate to describe her physical appearance. She was about five foot three inches tall and remained slender throughout her career. She had

dark hair and an extremely expressive and mobile face. Two facets of her appearance were most frequently mentioned; they were her large, expressive eyes and her supple body, which Ward Morehouse reported she could "double up like a snake."[175] Although throughout her career Nazimova was criticized for her Russian accent, she evidently had a soft and pleasant voice which could easily be heard in a theatre.

Nazimova's most outstanding physical characteristic, however, may well have been her ability to look different in each role that she played. "One of her most surprising characteristics was that she never looked the same. At one time she dazzled you with her beauty and smartness, at another time she looked completely drab and ordinary, a third time she suggested the maitresse of a French Baron."[176] This ability to change her appearance was to bring Nazimova unique praise from American critics as soon as they had seen her perform in two different plays, Hedda Gabler and A Doll's House.

Footnotes

[1]Mary B. Mullett, "How a Dull, Fat Little Girl Became a Great Actress," American Magazine, XLIII (April, 1922), 19.

[2]Clifford C. Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLV (April, 1959), 182.

[3]Mullett, "How a Dull, Fat Little Girl Became a Great Actress," op. cit., p. 19.

[4]Lucille Erskine, "Nazimova--the Unknowable," Theatre, XII (December, 1912), 190.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Claire Ross, "Music in the Theatre," Musical Courier, LXXVII (August 8, 1918), 18.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Katherine Roberts, "Artists don't need Ruffles," Collier's, LXXXX (December, 1932), 9.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Mullett, "How a Dull, Fat Little Girl Became a Great Actress," op. cit., p. 19.

[11]Djuna Barnes, "Alla Nazimova, One of the Greatest of Living Actresses Talks of Her Art," Theatre Guild Magazine, VII (June, 1930), 32.

[12]Mullett, "How a Dull, Fat, Little Girl Became a Great Actress," op. cit., p. 19.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Nikolai A. Gorchakov, The Theater in Soviet Russia (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 27.

[18]Morton Eustis, Players at Work (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1937), p. 50.

[19]Mullett, "How a Dull, Fat Little Girl Became a Great Actress," op. cit., p. 19.

[20]Ibid., p. 111.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Alla Nazimova, "I Come Full Circle," Theatre Magazine, XLIX (April, 1928), 18, 64, 67.

[23]Ibid., p. 18.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Mullett, "How a Dull, Fat Little Girl Became a Great Actress," op. cit., p. 111.

[26]Owen Johnson, "Madame Alla Nazimova," Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine, LXXIV (June, 1907), 227.

[27]Nazimova, "I Come Full Circle," op. cit., p. 18.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Alexander Kirkland, "The Woman from Yalta," Theatre Arts Monthly, XXXIII (December, 1949), 39.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Nazimova, "I Come Full Circle," op. cit., p. 64.

[33]Christine Edwards, The Stanislavsky Heritage (New York: New York University Press, 1965), pp. 214-15.

[34]De Witt Bodeen, "Nazimova," Films in Review, XXIII (December, 1972), 578.

[35]Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," op. cit., p. 182.

[36]David Magarshack, Stanislavsky (New York: Chanticleer Press, 1951), p. 178.

[37]Phyllis Hartnoll, ed., The Oxford Companion to the Theatre, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 167.

[38]Erika Munk, ed., Stanislavsky and America (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), p. 138.

[39]Eustis, Players at Work, op. cit., p. 50.

[40]Gorchakov, The Theatre in Soviet Russia, op. cit., p. 28.

[41]Ibid., p. 29.

[42]Harry Ellerbe, personal letter to author, July 13, 1972.

[43]Mullet, "How a Dull, Fat Little Girl Became a Great Actress," op. cit., p. 111.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Alla Nazimova, "My Yesterdays," Bohemian, VII (June, 1907), 85-87.

[46]Ibid.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," op. cit., p. 182.

[49]Mullett, "How a Dull, Fat Little Girl Became a Great Actress," op. cit., p. 111.

[50]Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," op. cit., p. 182.

[51]Mullett, "How a Dull, Fat Little Girl Became a Great Actress," op. cit., p. 111.

[52]Ibid., pp. 111-12.

[53]Ibid., p. 112.

[54]Nazimova, "My Yesterdays," op. cit., pp. 85-87.

[55]Kirkland, "The Woman from Yalta," op. cit., p. 29.

[56]Ashby believes that they met in St. Petersburg during 1903, although Nazimova's article in Bohemian states that she had toured with Orleneff for the two previous summers.

[57]Homer Saint-Gaudens, "The Russian Players," Critic, XLVIII (January-June, 1906), 319.

[58]Mark L'vovich Slonim, Russian Theatre (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 244.

[59]Boris V. Varneke, History of the Russian Theatre (New York: Macmillan, 1951), p. 409.

[60]Hartnoll, The Oxford Companion to the Theatre, op. cit., p. 708.

[61]Kellog Durland, "Paul Orleneff and His Company of Russian Players," Theatre, V (December, 1905), 315.

[62]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 579.

[63]Saint-Gaudens, "The Russian Players," op. cit., p. 319.

[64]Oliver Sayler, The Russian Theatre (New York: Brentanos Publishers, 1922), pp. 200-01.

[65]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 579.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Mullett, "How a Dull, Fat Little Girl Became a Great Actress," op. cit., p. 112.

[68]Henry James Forman, "New Histrionic Genius and Her Art," Harper's Weekly, LI (April 20, 1907), 576.

[69]Mullett, "How a Dull, Fat Little Girl Became a Great Actress," op. cit., p. 112.

[70]Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," op. cit., p. 183.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Ibid.

[73]Saint-Gaudens, "The Russian Players," op. cit., p. 319.

[74]New York Times, March 23, 1905, 6:1.

[75]Ibid.

[76]Durland, "Paul Orleneff and His Company of Russian Players," op. cit., p. 315.

[77]Chicago Post, February 17, 1906, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[78]Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," op. cit., p. 184.

[79]Robert W. Shoemaker, "Russian Drama on the New York Stage from the Beginning to 1920" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1951), p. 70.

[80]Saint-Gaudens, "The Russian Players," op. cit., p. 320.

[81]Richard Drinnon, Rebel in Paradise (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 95.

[82]Saint-Gaudens, "The Russian Players," op. cit., p. 320.

[83]Ibid.

[84]Unidentified newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[85]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., pp. 580-81.

[86]Unidentified newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[87]Saint-Gaudens, "The Russian Players," op. cit., p. 320.

[88]George Middleton, These Things Are Mine (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 263.

[89]Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 277.

[90]Unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[91]Christian Brinton, "Idols of the Russian Masses," Cosmopolitan, XL (April, 1906), 620.

[92]New York Globe, January 7, 1906, 11:2.

[93]Saint-Gaudens, "The Russian Players," op. cit., p. 318.

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[95]Barnes, "Alla Nazimova, One of the Greatest of Living Actresses Talks of Her Art," op. cit., p. 32.

[96]Arthur Ruhl, "Nazimova Again," Collier's, XLV (May 7, 1910), 34.

[97]Alan Dale quoted in Ward Morehouse, Matinee Tomorrow (New York: McGraw Hill, 1949), p. 70.

[98]Johnson, "Madame Alla Nazimova," op. cit., p. 226.

[99]Saint-Gaudens, "The Russian Players," op. cit., p. 320.

[100]Forman, "New Histrionic Genius and Her Art," op. cit., p. 576.

[101]Brinton, "Idols of the Russian Masses," op. cit., p. 620.

[102]"Transformation of Nazimova," Current Literature, XLII (December, 1907), 671.

[103]Ada Patterson, "An Interview with a Multiple Woman," Theatre, VII (August, 1907), 220.

[104]James S. Huneker, Steeplejack (New York: Charles Scribner, 1928), p. 244.

[105]"Russian Artiste Becomes an American Star," Theatre, VII (January, 1907), 13.

[106]Sayler, The Russian Theatre, op. cit., p. 201.

[107]Huneker, Steeplejack, op. cit., p. 244.

[108]Sayler, The Russian Theatre, op. cit., pp. 201-02.

[109]Slonim, Russian Theatre, op. cit., p. 244.

[110]Hutchins Hapgood, "Paul Orleneff," Collier's, XLVIII (March 16, 1912), 22.

[111]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 579.

[112]Mullett, "How a Dull, Fat Little Girl Became a Great Actress," op. cit., p. 112.

[113]Sayler, The Russian Theatre, op. cit., p. 201.

[114]Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," op. cit., p. 183.

[115]"The Creative Acting of Paul Orleneff," Current Literature, LII (May, 1912), 579.

[116]Slonim, Russian Theatre, op. cit., p. 244.

[117]Saint-Gaudens, "The Russian Players," op. cit., p. 319.

[118]"The Creative Acting of Paul Orleneff," op. cit., p. 579.

[119]Hapgood, "Paul Orleneff," op. cit., p. 22.

[120]Slonim, Russian Theatre, op. cit., p. 244.

[121]Brinton, "Idols of the Russian Masses," op. cit., p. 620.

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[123]Slonim, Russian Theatre, op. cit., p. 244.

[124]Durland, "Paul Orleneff and His Company of Russian Players," op. cit., p. 315.

[125]Brinton, "Idols of the Russian Masses," op. cit., p. 620.

[126]Durland, "Paul Orleneff and His Company of Russian Players," op. cit., p. xi.

[127]Harry Ellerbe, personal letter to author, July 13, 1972.

[128]Letter, Alla Nazimova to New York Sun, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[129]New York Sun, undated newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[130]New York Sun, April 22, 1938, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[131]Ibid.

[132]Letter, Alla Nazimova to New York Sun, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[133]William A. Brady, Showman (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1937), p. 261-62.

[134]Mullett, "How a Dull, Fat Little Girl Became a Great Actress," op. cit., p. 112.

[135]"An 'Interview' with Alla Nazimova," Equity Magazine, XLIV (May, 1959), 8.

[136]Frank Philip Morse, Backstage with Henry Miller (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1938), p. 41.

[137]"Russian Artiste Becomes an American Star," op. cit., p. 13.

[138]Acton Davies, "Madame Alla Nazimova," Cosmopolitan, LIII (November, 1912), 837.

[139]Dale, "Nazimova, the Inscrutable," op. cit., p. 305.

[140]"Acting and English of Nazimova," Harper's Weekly, LI (February 16, 1907), 240.

[141]"Transformation of Nazimova," Current Literature, XLII (December, 1907), 672.

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[143]Letter, Alla Nazimova to New York Sun, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[144]Hazel Simpson Naylor, "My Devilish Ambition," Motion Picture Magazine, XV (July, 1918), 55.

[145]Lawrence Langner, The Magic Curtain (New York: Dutton and Co., 1951), p. 256.

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[148]Morse, Backstage with Henry Miller, op. cit., p. 41.

[149]Marguerite T. Courtney, Laurette (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 78.

[150]This statement was made in an interview with the author on June 21, 1973.

[151]Morton Eustis, Players at Work (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1927), p. 51.

[152]Ibid., p. 54.

[153]Ibid.

[154]Unidentified newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[155]Eustis, Players at Work, op. cit., p. 51.

[156]Ibid., p. 53.

[157]Ibid., p. 58.

[158]"An 'Interview' with Alla Nazimova," op. cit., p. 9.

[159]"Nazimova--An Apostle of the Drama," Theatre, XXV (March, 1917), 144.

[160]Toby Cole and Helen Chinoy, Actors on Acting (New York: Crown Publishers, 1949), p. 512.

[161]Kirkland, "The Woman from Yalta," op. cit., p. 94.

[162]Eva Le Gallienne, At 33 (New York: Longman's Green, 1934), p. 221.

[163]Roberts, "Artists don't need Ruffles," op. cit., p. 91.

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[166]Eustis, Players At Work, op. cit., p. 54.

[167]Arthur Melancthon Hopkins, To a Lonely Boy (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., Inc., 1937), p. 164.

[168]Francine Markel, Public Ledger, undated newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[169]Patterson, "An Interview with a Multiple Woman," op. cit., p. 220.

[170]Mae Tinee, Chicago Tribune, February 16, 1913, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[171]De Foe, "Nazimova at Last Meets Her Big Promise," op. cit., p. 910.

[172]See Lawrence Langner quotations in Chapter V which covers Nazimova's mature roles.

[173]Eustis, Players at Work, op. cit., p. 57.

[174]Kirkland, "The Woman from Yalta," op. cit., p. 93.

[175]Ward Morehouse, Matinee Tomorrow (New York Whittlesey House, McGraw Hill, 1949), pp. 69-70.

[176]Langner, The Magic Curtain, op. cit., p. 255.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST YEARS ON BROADWAY

Biography

A series of matinee performances of Ibsen's Hedda Gabler opened at the Princess Theatre in New York City on November 13, 1906. Directed by Henry Miller, whose production of The Great Divide was occupying the theatre in the evening, the play introduced Alla Nazimova, performing in English for the first time upon the American stage. The opening performance was described by Frank Morse.

> The venture was an instant success from every point of view. The new star proved an absolute sensation. She rose beautifully to the full possibilities of Hedda. Her broken English seemed to add a piquant charm to the character. When the audience, storming its approval, demanded a speech, the Russian girl held out her hands in supplication and exclaimed in broken English. "Let me feel--not speak."[1]

Although originally intended to run for only a few performances, the production was such a success that the matinees were continued for two months.

The season of 1906-07 was eventful for the American theatre because it saw the premiere performance of Nazimova, an actress who would delight audiences in

varied productions over the next forty years. Even without those matinee performances, however, 1906-07 was a memorable season for the theatregoer. Mrs. Fiske was performing in Langdon Mitchell's The New York Idea, Margaret Anglin was starring in Moody's The Great Divide, and vaudeville was honored by the presence of Lily Langtry and Lillian Russell. In fact, according to Alan Dale, the last thing New York needed was a new star.[2] The theatrical world was submerged beneath a plethora of female stars including Maude Adams, Marie Doro, Viola Allen, Grace George, Doris Keane, Julia Marlowe, Clara Morris and Jane Oaker. This was the grand era of the personality actor. Alan Dale mourned in the April, 1907 issue of Cosmopolitan:

> You see the same faces, hear the same voices, watch the same merits and the same defects. Nothing varies except the name of the play on the programme; or possibly the disease from which the heroine dies in Act V.[3]

But the advent of Nazimova was the beginning of the end for the stars who used the same personality in all their productions.[4]

Hedda Gabler, starring Alla Nazimova, received remarkable critical acclaim. Curious because of the reputation she had established with the Russian-speaking St. Petersburg Players, critics flocked to the theatre to review the actress's first English speaking production. The response was gratifying to the Shuberts, Miller and

Nazimova. In a typical critique the New York Times hailed the successful performance and described Nazimova as "one of the most remarkable actresses of the times."[5] Dale described the critics' reaction to the arrival of the new star.

> Slowly but surely . . . Madame Nazimova began to be the talk of the town, and her exquisite art--about which there could be no more doubt than there is that the sun shines--found recognition.[6]

The matinees of Hedda Gabler were followed by a series of matinees of Ibsen's A Doll's House with Nazimova portraying Nora. The Shuberts and Miller, aware that the young actress was a unique performer, planned the production with care. While encouraging Nazimova to direct the play, the producers concentrated on handling the publicity. This managerial concern proved fruitful. The production opened to excellent reviews with most of the critics marvelling at the difference between Nazimova's performances as Hedda and Nora.

> The delight in watching an artist who played two characters absolutely differently was keen and tonic-y. We had got out of the way of expecting that sort of thing.[7]

The cumulative impact of the two performances was so unique that several critics made prophetic statements about the new actress. Owen Johnson summed up the response.

> The reception by the press was unique. Without a discordant note, Madame Alla Nazimova was acclaimed

> as the new dramatic force in the succession to Duse and Bernhardt.[8]

Nazimova had arrived as a force on the American stage; and, in the rush of first reknown, she was kept extremely busy. Ibsen, even with Nazimova, would not run forever; so Henry Miller and the Shuberts searched for a new vehicle for their star. Nazimova suggested an Italian play which she had seen in Russia at the Imperial Theatre, entitled The Comtesse Coquette. The actress was eager to do the role because it was not strenuous, and she was weary after playing Hedda and Nora for some months. Nazimova described her reasoning as follows:

> The Comtesse Coquette is not unusual nor complex. She is a universal type in high society, and so easy that she is . . . a snap. It is only a child's play.[9]

Her managers acquiesed. Miller had the play translated into English several times and selected a version which stressed the role which Nazimova was to play.[10] They rehearsed for three weeks and opened on April 12, 1907 at the Bijou Theatre in New York.

The Comtesse Coquette ran for several months and received fairly good notices, but the critics muted their praise by observing that Nazimova's English was not all that it should be and that she was developing some mannerisms which detracted from her performance. The slight plot gave the reviewers time to concentrate

on the techniques employed by the actress. Theatre's response was typical.

> Madame Nazimova is improving her command of English, but she must reform her faults and limitations altogether before she can be entitled to unbounded praise. She has excellent qualities, mobility of expression and much personal charm, but she has some distance to go before she can be proclaimed the supreme artist of the American stage.[11]

The play closed down during the summer and reopened in October, but it was not particularly successful. The search for a new play began again. Establishing a pattern which would remain consistent throughout her career, the actress returned to the playwright who had established her stardom.

Ibsen's The Master Builder opened at the end of November, 1907, and once again the Shubert, Miller and Nazimova team scored a big success. The difficult play was enhanced by the fine performance of Walter Hampden in the demanding role of Halvard Solness. The combination of Nazimova and Hampden kept the theatre crowded for many weeks and received almost universally excellent reviews. The acclaim was such that, by December, the actress was so irritated with the constant publicity that she announced she would no longer sit for photographers.[12]

During this period Miller withdrew from the management of Nazimova's stage career. Lee Shubert was amazed to learn that Miller would not even accept a

financial settlement. In Backstage with Henry Miller Frank Morse describes the separation but does not give any reason for the break. According to Morse, "Miller was obdurate and there is nothing on record to show that he ever changed his impulsive decision."[13]

As The Master Builder drew to the close of its run, the unrelenting search for a play to serve as a vehicle for the unusual talent of Nazimova continued unabated in the Shubert office. What was needed was a drama that would attract the masses of people who were curious to see Madame Nazimova, but were not interested in the dramas of Henrik Ibsen. The choice this time settled on a new drama by a new playwright, Owen Johnson. His play, entitled The Comet, was set in the Spanish Pyrenees and provided Nazimova with the role of Lona, the cinder woman. Classified by critics as "one of her numerous wretched plays,"[14] the production, nevertheless, had an important impact on the career of the young actress. Here we see the introduction of the "exotic," "siren" image that was to be further developed in later productions and fully established during Nazimova's career in the films. The actress personally furthered the image by designing a gown in which she reminded audiences of a vampire. A newspaper clipping describes her appearance: "The black dress fell from her arms like the wings of a bird and when her arms were outstretched gave the

impression that the actress was a vampire."[15]

The Comet's critical reception was typical of the two-sided reviews that Nazimova was to receive throughout her career on the stage. Frequently reviewers disliked the plays in which the actress appeared, but at the same time they were responsive to her expressive performance. The New York Times review of The Comet is a characteristic example. The critic felt that the play was "long drawn out, . . . tedious and . . . vague;" but at the same time the writer was impressed by the performance given by the young Nazimova.

> Of Madame Nazimova, it may be said that she had never shown finer moments than on occasion in this play, and in such a passage, for example, as that in which she describes her sufferings in the world of men there is a poignant heart-searching throbbing pathos. The woman's coldness, her weariness, her disinterestedness are conveyed with equal truth. The flashing up of the newer ambition--this too is developed with admirable skill.[16]

Walter Prichard Eaton was so impressed by Nazimova's performance in The Comet that he felt he could not judge the value of the play until he saw it performed by another actress.[17] In his laudatory review he stated that in Nazimova "the art of mere bodily pose and suggestion is seen at its very finest."[18]

The Comet's mixed reviews made the New York run brief, yet it proved an ideal vehicle to introduce the "exotic" actress to the rest of the country. Nazimova toured the United States of America in The Comet for most

of 1908.

The next production selected for the actress was entitled The Passion Flower. Even Nazimova's exotic image could not sustain this poor play and it never even reached New York City. Undoubtedly selecting a play for Nazimova presented a unique problem to the Shuberts. The actress still spoke English with a heavy Russian accent which automatically eliminated any English classics and most contemporary American plays. It was hard to find plays for her, but at the same time, as William Winter pointed out, her "singularity of appearance and eccentricity of demeanor have for several years made her an object of public curiosity."[19]

Once again Nazimova selected a play by Henrik Ibsen. This time the choice was Little Eyolf. Knowing that plays by the eminent Norwegian dramatist needed effective publicity to attract large audiences, the Shuberts gave added impact to the opening of Little Eyolf by naming a new theatre on Thirty-Ninth Street the Nazimova Theatre. The tiny theatre seated fewer than seven hundred people, but the interior design made it seem larger.[20]

With Nazimova portraying Rita against the Allmers of Brandon Tynan, Little Eyolf ran for an astonishing forty-eight performances. The production was almost universally acclaimed. Oliver Sayler accounted it one of

the important productions on the American stage between 1908 and 1923.[21]

Forty-eight performances will not sustain a theatre, and soon Nazimova was touring the country in a production of Schnitzler's The Fairy Tale. As usual in an ineffective play the actress took every opportunity to develop her character through eccentric behavior, often to the distinct detriment of the over-all production. As the play toured the country the critics in most cities found flaws in Nazimova's work. The reviewer from the Boston Transcript described her performance as follows:

> There was no relief, no contrast, no relaxation. If it were her lot to stand idly by while others of the story contributed to the incident, she assumed attitudes that oozed agony. She emphasized each phrase, each word, each refinement of meaning until the whole scene became one gigantic emphasis. Powerful it was, but power obtained at the sacrifice of dramatic action, dragged and distorted.[22]

Percy Hammond in the Chicago Tribune contributed another side of the picture.

> As usual Miss Nazimova is eerie and exotic in her effective way, though much less so than in some of her previous appearances here; and by inexcusable facial hysteria and other acquired eccentricities mars what otherwise might be a masterpiece of emotional acting.[23]

The continual search for a vehicle for an exotic actress eventually told on the relationship between Nazimova and the Shuberts, and in February, 1911, Nazimova announced that she would leave the Shuberts and work under the management of Charles Frohman. As a penalty the

Shuberts announced that the Nazimova Theatre would henceforth be known as the Thirty-Ninth Street Theatre.

Nazimova stated that she was eager to join with Charles Frohman because he handled new European dramas;[24] but in June of 1911, Frohman gave Ethel Barrymore the play Counsel for the Defense in which Nazimova had wanted to appear. In August, however, the New York Telegram announced that Nazimova had read a new play by Algernon Boyesen entitled The Other Mary, liked it, and, therefore, would appear shortly in her first play on American life.[25]

Nazimova's first production under Frohman's management, and in a play on American life, was anything but auspicious. The Other Mary played to universally bad reviews and never even reached Broadway. According to the Chicago Record:

> The play is a long tedious, ridiculous yawp [sic], false in language, sentiment and morals. The acting . . . was mawkish and excessive.[26]

Once again, under Frohman's management this time, the search for a play commenced. Settling upon a French play, The Marionettes by Pierre Wolff, this time the team was quite successful. The reviews were generally favorable, several critics mentioning that the writhing and posturing which had become typical of Nazimova's performances, was considerably reduced. There were still detrimental comments about the star's heavy accent, but the primary critical emphasis again lay with the disappointment

inherent in seeing an extraordinary actress in an inferior play.

Frohman's next selection for his paradoxical star was to keep her touring the country for a year and a half, until in desperation she broke her contract to escape impersonating the bizarre Mrs. Chepstow. Entitled Bella Donna, the play only lasted three weeks on Broadway, but "the road ate it up."[27] The primary emphasis in the newspaper reviews of the play seems to lie with the singular dresses that Nazimova wore in the production, although the play led several critics to make ominous comments about the future of the actress in the theatre. A reviewer complained: " . . . eccentric tendencies have already destroyed Madame Nazimova's once great efficiency in Ibsen roles, and they will eventually lead her, unless promptly checked, to the oblivion that has swallowed Olga Nethersole."[28]

Bella Donna had another impact on the life of Nazimova. The leading man, Charles Bryant, caught the eye of the actress who remarked to a friend, "He's six foot three and he is good, and I am so happy, oh so happy, that it seems too good to be true."[29] Their marriage was announced on December 5, 1912. Charles Bryant was to work closely with Nazimova for the next twelve years. He acted as her leading man and served as director and business manager until the announcement

of their Paris divorce on August 7, 1925.[30]

There is a footnote to the story of the Nazimova-Bryant marriage. In November, 1925, Charles Bryant married Marjorie Gilhooley. While obtaining the license Bryant stated that he had never been married before. The newspapers picked up the story, and the publicity forced Nazimova and Bryant to admit that their marriage had been a deception. Nazimova told the Hartford Courant:

> What is there to say? Everything that can be said has been said. Why should the matter be stirred up further? Mr. Bryant did not perjure himself. He is now happily married. Why bother with the matter?[31]

Perhaps the story of Nazimova's marital status should be completed here. During 1908 she announced that she would like to correct an error in the World Almanac which stated that she was Mrs. Paul N. Orleneff. The actress announced that she was actually Madame Sergius de Golovin. The sequel to the story comes in a letter Nazimova wrote to her friend Leone Scott in May, 1931.

> "Just a few points to put you straight. Born June 4, 1879 in Yalta, Crimea, Russia. Was married but divorced once and once only!"[32]

In his article "Nazimova" De Witt Bodeen describes the curious finale to the Nazimova marriage stories.

> Ironically, the fact that she had never really been Mrs. Charles Bryant was forgotten, almost as if by common consent, by every newspaperman. When Nazimova died in '45, every one of her obituaries listed her as having been married once--to Charles Bryant.[33]

The Bella Donna tour lasted until May, 1914 when Nazimova finally broke with Frohman. The actress dreamed then of a world tour playing in French in Paris, in Italian in Rome and in English in England,[34] but when she sailed for Europe in June of that year she was realistic enough to admit that the tour she was planning would be only in English with a repertoire composed principally of Ibsen.[35]

Nazimova was in London planning her world tour when World War I broke out. She signed with Liebeler and Company for the 1914-15 season on Broadway and returned to the United States on the Lusitania. The actress's first production under the new management was a play entitled That Sort. It closed immediately.

In March, 1916 Nazimova, frustrated by managers who were unable to come up with plays suited to her talents, announced that she would become her own manager. A company entitled the New York Season Company was formed by October of the same year under the business management of Charles Bryant and Walter F. Wanger. The new company announced an ambitious season of plays, including the ubiquitous Ibsen, 'Ception Shoals by Austin Adams, The Price of Life by Danchenko and Schnitzler's The Fairy Tale. The company's finances were evidently as ambitious as their season because almost immediately they ran afoul of the courts. Scheduled to open at the Lyceum

Theatre on November 27, 1916, the company did not pay the necessary deposit for the theatre. Supreme Court Justice Shearn forbade the opening, and the Lyceum was leased to a more solvent group.

The New York Season Company eventually opened at the Princess Theatre with 'Ception Shoals. The Princess was only a small theatre, but Nazimova was forced to use it. Theatre managers did not believe in repertory, and so they were unwilling to lease to the actress unless she allowed them to select the plays in which she was to appear. The continual paradox was at work again. Nazimova was best in the plays of Ibsen, but Ibsen would not draw people into the theatre, so she was forced to perform in popular dramas in which she generally overacted.

'Ception Shoals by H. Austin Adams is the tragic story of a girl who lived in a lighthouse with her uncle and knew nothing about the evils of the real world. Even though most of the critics felt that the play was ridiculous they invariably pointed out that Nazimova's performance was quite special. Following the precedent established during Nazimova's first years on the American stage, reviewers eagerly noted that once again Nazimova had created a totally different type of character. The reviewer from Theatre described the characterization.

> The part of Eve is quite different to other Nazimova roles. No longer the pallid, cigarette smoking neurasthenic, tossing off epigrams, she is seen as

> a young virgin, astonishingly slight and girlish looking.[36]

An incident which occurred during a performance of 'Ception Shoals in Washington D. C. gives some insight into the "star" performer that Nazimova had become. During a performance the actress heard a conversation coming from the box of Mrs. Marshall Field. Turning to the box, Nazimova called for the curtain and the scene immediately stopped. Then the lights in the theatre were turned out, leaving only the lights in the offending box. Needless to say when the curtain came up on Act III the box was empty.[37]

Between 1916 and 1923 Nazimova was principally involved in making films, but she did appear in a season of Ibsen in repertory at the Plymouth Theatre under the direction of Arthur Hopkins. The plays selected for the season were A Doll's House, Hedda Gabler and The Wild Duck, in which Nazimova portrayed the role of the fourteen year old Hedwig. Arthur Hopkins later described his reaction to her surprising role selection.

> I wanted Nazimova to play Gina, the mother, but she elected to play the fourteen year old Hedwig. The idea was at first startling, but I soon saw the wisdom of it. She was a slight person of no age and an artist who could bring to the part mature understanding. She was one actress who never had to find again the histrionic gifts of childhood. They had never left her. If anything, they had expanded with maturity. She was sensitive, timorous and afraid of herself.[38]

Each of the three plays lasted for about a month on Broadway. For the first time in her career, however, Nazimova received several very poor reviews for performances in plays by Ibsen. The New York Times critic John Corbin was particularly vindictive. He objected to the actress's broken English, her eccentricities, her writhing and her mechanical performance in both Hedda Gabler and The Wild Duck. His benign comments were reserved for her Nora in A Doll's House, but even they were benign only in contrast to his disparaging remarks about Nazimova's Hedda and Hedwig.

> Madame Nazimova's Nora . . . [is] the least mannered, and therefore the most satisfying of all her Ibsen heroines. . . . Her technical cleverness and the vigor of her personality has never been more fortunately in evidence.[39]

Although the repertory season did not receive outstanding reviews, it certainly was not without merit. Writing in 1965 and describing The Making of the American Theatre, Howard Taubman considered the Nazimova-Hopkins season of Ibsen repertory to be a part of the renewed energy which was demonstrated on the American theatre scene before 1920.[40]

Nazimova had obtained her wish for Ibsen in repertory, but, as the theatre managers had predicted, the season was not a financial success. Perhaps the impact of this unfortunate reality of the theatrical world affected the actress's decision, for she spent the next

five years working in films until she lost all the money she had made and was forced to return to the legitimate stage in January, 1923.

By 1923 Nazimova had achieved the fame, although not necessarily the box office appeal, that the film world can create. Reknowned as much for her eccentric behavior as for her acting, she found it necessary to try to live up to the public image of her behavior. She is described attending a supper party at Laurette Taylor's house. Arriving at the top of a staircase,

> She does not descend immediately, but stretches her arms out along the balcony rail and gazes broodingly down on the people beneath. Then she turns, looks back at the arched doors through which she has come and lets the shawl slip slowly from shoulders to waist revealing a completely naked back. "Bee-autiful!" she breathes to no one, and about nothing in particular.[41]

Dagmar, the play in which Nazimova elected to return to the theatre in 1923, fostered the image she had already created in the mind of the American and British public through her film appearances. Described as "a smoldering drama from the continent filled with lingering embraces and sensuous illicit love scenes,"[42] the production was directed by B. Iden Payne. Critical response was lukewarm, although the writers noted that Nazimova did manage to bring some reality to the passionate drama.[43] Kenneth Macgowan, writing for the Boston Globe, made a suggestion that must have been in the minds of many other critics of the theatre.

> It hardly seems likely that it [Dagmar] held any quality worthy of the actress who once played A Doll's House and Little Eyolf. The saddest part of an evening at Dagmar is that it suggests that the Nazimova who could come out of the movies to disport herself in such a play has little of that quality left.[44]

Unsuccessful in the films, a victim of the general public who spurned the kinds of plays she enhanced, it seemed that Nazimova's promising career in the theatre was almost over.

The Theatre Guild evidently felt that the actress was past her prime. During 1923 Lawrence Langner was planning the premiere production of Shaw's St. Joan. Shaw, who had recently seen Nazimova perform in moving pictures, suggested that the actress might be suited for the role of Joan. Langner, after seeing Nazimova in a vaudeville one-act entitled The Unknown Lady, wrote Shaw that the staff at the Theatre Guild felt that Nazimova was too old to play Joan. In addition they mentioned that the actress had developed an acting style in the cinema which would not be suited to Shaw's play.[45] She did not get the part.

During the first phase of Nazimova's career on the stage in the United States she performed in seventeen full length plays. Employing the acting technique she had learned from Nemirovitch-Dantchenko and Stanislavsky and developed through her work with Paul Orleneff, she was at first highly successful. Since she was limited,

however, by her penchant for serious drama and her Russian accent, it became increasingly evident that, aside from Ibsen, there were few playwrights whose roles suited her work. The popular plays selected for the actress during this phase of her career engendered an increasing reliance on mannerisms, posing, and the creation of characters who were unique but not believable.

The plays selected for detailed analysis in this chapter are examples of both the best and the worst of Nazimova's work during this phase of her career. The discussions of Hedda Gabler, A Doll's House, The Master Builder and Little Eyolf demonstrate her early mastery of Ibsen's characters and illustrate the correspondingly warm praise she received from the critics who were delighted by her refreshing approach to the roles. Nazimova's acting in Bella Donna, in contrast, clearly illustrates the kind of artificial, "exotic" characters she played in popular dramas. The characters she created in these plays repelled most critics but, for a while, fascinated the general public. Eve in 'Ception Shoals is an example of the kind of role the actress selected to play when she became her own manager. The youthful role was a harbinger of the actress's predilection for "Mary Pickford" roles which surfaced during her film career. The final play selected for detailed analysis in this chapter is Ibsen's The Wild Duck. It is another

example of Nazimova's desire to play youthful roles, but in addition it demonstrates the acting style the actress was employing, even in Ibsen, after twelve years on the American stage. The critical response to The Wild Duck was almost in direct contrast to the critical response to Hedda Gabler.

Early Ibsen Performances

Hedda Gabler.--The Ibsen drama opened on November 13, 1906 with Nazimova, then an obscure Russian actress, performing in English for the first time on the stage of the Princess Theatre in New York City. Her Hedda Gabler performance was eulogized by Louis Untermeyer in "Nazimova as Hedda Gabler."

> Woman of stone! Sphinx of Marble mien!
> Empress of Hate, you turn men's blood to ice--
> Lithe as the sensuous serpents that entice
> With fearful fascination.[46]

In fact, the matinee performance of Ibsen's drama of a frustrated woman received such excellent critical response that Henry Miller and the Shuberts extended the run for two months. Gradually her producers began to realize that Madame Alla Nazimova was bringing something new and special to the American stage.

Exhaustively described in the press, repeatedly photographed, Nazimova's performance as Hedda Gabler can be reconstructed in elucidating detail. Entering through a doorway at the top of a flight of stairs; dressed in

a long, straight costume; wearing her hair piled on top of her head; shod in extraordinarily high heeled shoes; made up to emphasize the pallor of her complexion; Nazimova paused "for an effective moment, with one arm stretched high in air, clasping a drapery hung over her head."[47]

Many critics, struck by the unknown performer's unusual control over her physical appearance, indulged in complete descriptions of Nazimova's Hedda Gabler. Owen Johnson's complimentary sketch follows.

> As the patrician Hedda, her face was long and thinly aristocratic, the sweeping lines of the neck were exposed, the beautiful open forehead was revealed by a strangely effective coiffure of the hair, which was drawn back and up in a semi-hellenic pyramid. The lips were straight and cruel with a scorn of life, the eyebrows in their thin arches brooded over the eyes that slanted in languid ennui.[48]

In an attempt to communicate the unique quality that Nazimova brought to Hedda, several critics resorted to animal images. The most popular seemed to be the panther, encouraged perhaps by the actress's "jet black hair"[49] and black costumes. Other reviewers compared Nazimova to a vampire, or a serpent: "an ominous shining thing that might have trailed its length unnoticed in the grass."[50] In yet another attempt to communicate the essence of the character the Nation observed that "her Hedda Gabler was a woman of distinctly Oriental type,"[51] anything but the Norwegian that Ibsen had intended.

The animal images employed by the critics embellish the reader's perception of the kind of movement that Nazimova used as Hedda Gabler. She continually employed movement that was described as languorous, lithe and sensuous. John Webber gave the reader his impression of the portrayal:

> the studied deliberation with its intervals of silence, its studied poses, its languor and general atmosphere of boredom expressed in every movement and line of her supple body.[52]

Elisabeth Cary praised the actress's expressive hands. " . . . and--most of all--the working of her eloquent hands model and define her characteristics as if she were manipulating plastic clay."[53]

Accustomed to the flamboyant acting style employed by many actors at the turn of the century, critics lauded the more restrained methods Nazimova used to communicate Hedda's inner torment. Again John Webber's thoughtful study, which appeared in Canadian Magazine, gives a valuable portrait of the varying emotions which the audience saw mirrored on Nazimova's face.

> Cynicism, contempt for poor commonplace Tesman and his amiable aunts, malignant hatred of the ingenuous Mrs. Elvsted, with her reclamation of Lovberg and depicted with almost imperceptible changes of countenance and tone.[54]

Evidently passion and charm existed side by side in this unusual characterization; although one reviewer complained that the actress's face demonstrated such passionate unhappiness that there was no room left for

charm.[55]

Hedda Gabler was Nazimova's first English speaking role, therefore most of the critics accepted her accent and did not try to evaluate her vocal ability. The review in Harper's Weekly concluded that the slow, deliberate speech that the actress employed during most of the play made the audience overestimate her knowledge of the English language.[56] Theatre observed that Nazimova's Russian accent added a not unpleasant foreign flavor to the production.[57] Nevertheless, the basically unfavorable review criticized the strong contrast between Nazimova's foreign voice and acting style and the American voices and styles of the other actors. Nation, sounding a note which would be repeated for the next ten years, remarked, "If she can only master the English language she will be one of the brightest ornaments of the American stage."[58]

Mrs. Whiffen, who played Aunt Julie in Nazimova's first production of Hedda Gabler, described the actress's eccentric behavior at rehearsals; she also remembered Nazimova's amusing difficulties with the English language.[59] In an interview with Owen Johnson, Nazimova detailed her nervousness at performing in the new language. Observing that the sudden realization of the difficulty of the endeavor struck the actress just as she prepared to make her first entrance, Johnson stated. "For the

first half of the opening act she moved through her role in a daze, but gradually her assurance returned and she finished triumphantly."[60]

Nazimova, who had directed Hedda Gabler, as well as starred in the production, revealed valuable information about her approach to the play in personal interviews given to reporters and critics. Readers learned that Nazimova had studied the play for four years. Although she loved the role of Hedda she found it very difficult to perform.

> I put all of myself into it. Every performance seemed to tear me to pieces. Hedda was a great big part of me, all of me there is to give.[61]

The actress, well aware that some critics felt her interpretation of the role negated Ibsen's original intent, defended her position to the press. She believed that Hedda "has a little of all women in her,"[62] but that her character was consistant throughout the play. Adding that Hedda represents "the ultra refined and hypercritical aristocrat . . . who is bored to morbidity by her marriage,"[63] Nazimova indicated that she identified with the character of the tormented woman.

> I am sorry for Hedda Gabler. I understand her. Anyone would have done what she did in her place. Her mental condition was affected by her physical. She was for a time insane.[64]

Nazimova also responded to the forceful stricture of William Archer and other reviewers who had criticized her exaggeration of Hedda's physiological condition. The

actress replied:

> I cannot change my conception of the part to suit them. Her condition does not change Hedda's character, it only serves to accentuate her natural peculiarities and make them more dramatic. Ibsen might just as well have left that point out, only it might have been more difficult than to make the character effectual.[65]

Nazimova undoubtedly emphasized the pathological characteristics of Hedda in her interpretation of the role.

In From Script to Stage Randolph Goodman describes a dramatic incident which happened when Archer saw Nazimova perform in Hedda Gabler. Lovborg entered the stage earlier than usual and Nazimova did not have time to hide the manuscript under a pillow. Forced to hide the book under her gown, she had a moment of revelation when Mrs. Elvsted compared Lovborg's loss of the manuscript to the killing of a dying child. Nazimova described her reaction to the speech.

> The thought of clasping a dead child filled me with such horror that my hands shrank from the touch of the manuscript, and it fell to the floor. Luckily I was able to cover it with my wrapper, and the scene was saved.[66]

Archer later noted that this imaginative departure from the script was so effective that even Ibsen would have approved.

Nazimova, as was to be her practice throughout her career, liked to have control over the costumes she wore in her productions. In Hedda Gabler everything the actress selected to wear accentuated the length of her

body. Frank Morse stated that she even played one scene standing on a footstool which was covered by her gown.[67] Archer described Nazimova as

> . . . robed in a strangely mottled fabric of green, a glorified kimono, falling straight from chin to toe and neck to heel, her dark head rising upon a slim, long neck above the shining folds. Madame Alla Nazimova looked not unlike the most beautiful, most glittering and powerful of serpents.[68]

Although this costume does not sound like a dress that the character Hedda Gabler would have selected to wear, it does indicate the stress that Nazimova put upon the physical side of her productions. She believed that costumes supported the communication of the character and the theme of the play. She selected costumes which were generally extremely memorable, particularly during the first phase of her career in the American theatre.

Nazimova's Hedda Gabler received almost endless consideration in the newspapers and magazine of the time. There were two stages to these reviews. In the first stage critics simply reviewed the work of an almost unknown Russian actress who was performing in English for the first time in Ibsen's Hedda Gabler. They were impressed by a Hedda "conceived as sensuous and languorous,"[69] and by the actress's ability to communicate Hedda's inner feelings. The true critical acclaim, however, did not occur until after Nazimova had been seen in her second role, Nora in A Doll's House. When the critics realized that the actress had created two

astonishingly different characters, most of them went back and reconsidered her performance as Hedda; thereby stimulating a spate of new articles comparing Nazimova's work in the leading roles in the two Ibsen dramas.

The first wave of criticism was not completely favorable. Though the reviewers agreed that the performance of Hedda was arresting, several stated that Nazimova appeared to ignore Ibsen's original intention. Theatre's critic remarked that the opening scenes "dragged gloomily,"[70] and that the young actress "lacked restraint."[71] Ida Gibson seems to sum up the negative responses. "Her delineation was most interesting. . . . But to the Ibsen student there was very little satisfaction in her portrayal."[72]

The critics who admired the performance--and they were legion--particularly after Nazimova's performance as Nora, were overwhelmed by her ability to make Hedda Gabler into a "conceivable woman."[73] John Webber's article in Canadian Magazine typifies the positive critical response.

> The greatness of the performance lies in the fact that without modifying a line of Hedda's character, Madame Nazimova so depicts the incongruity of her surroundings, so communicates their suffocating narrowness as to compel our sympathy from first to last.[74]

In 1918 Nazimova appeared as Hedda in the Hopkins repertory season. The production received almost uniformly bad notices. Critics generally felt that the

actress had retained too much of Bella Donna. John Corbin of the New York Times, in union with most of the other reviewers, complained about the heavy hand the actress employed in creating her Hedda.

> The figure that Nazimova presents is, from her first entrance, so sinister and diabolic as to be obviously pathologic. What should be light feline by-play, the toying of velvet paws that seem to caress even as they lacerate, becomes the swift strike of poisoned claws.[75]

Critical response to the 1918 Hedda was almost completely contrary to the response to the 1906 Hedda. By 1918, however, Nazimova had mannerisms ingrained in her acting style and most critics were familiar with her idiosyncrasies. In contrast, A Doll's House, which was an early Nazimova vehicle, found great critical favor.

A Doll's House.--This play, which first appeared on the New York stage in 1894 with Minnie Maddern Fiske as Nora, was Nazimova's second English speaking production in the United States. It opened on January 14, 1907 at the Princess Theatre. Produced by Henry Miller, under the mantle of the Shuberts, the production was primarily directed by the young actress herself.

Nazimova's first performance as Nora definitely established her unparalleled ability to differentiate physically between her characterizations. With nearly unprecedented accord critics lauded the arrival of a unique talent on the New York stage. "Without a

discordant note, Madame Alla Nazimova was acclaimed as the new dramatic force in the succession to Duse and Bernhardt."[76]

Because of the enthusiastic critical response to Nazimova's Nora, an exhaustive description of her appearance and performance can be compiled. Dressed in a rather short skirt, wearing practically heelless shoes, hair fluffed out on either side of her face, the whole topped off with a flat hat, audiences did not recognize Nazimova on her first entrance. They had become accustomed to the slender, exotic vision presented in her portrayal of Hedda Gabler. Owen Johnson gives his impression of Nazimova's onstage appearance as Nora.

> As to the doll-wife Nora she brought her hair down into a guirland [sic] of curls over a forehead that was seen only in flashes. The face was full, the eyebrows were ruthlessly shortened, so as no longer to dominate the face, the contour of the eyes was rounded, ready to hold a sudden petulant flood of tears; the nose was tipped saucily in the air, while the lips were full and slightly puckered, ready to tease, to pout, or to beguile, but becoming tragic in the contrast of their childish helplessness when the resolute woman emerges at the end of the play.
>
> She was always on tiptoe, always looking up at her husband or Dr. Rank, while her movements, instead of being languid and dignified were quick and bird-like. Even her voice, instead of the slow measured utterance of Hedda, took new tones as she chattered volubly and nervously.[77]

As Nora, Nazimova convinced most of the critics that she was short and rather dumpy. Over and over again the word "little" is included in the character description. The Nation, noting that she "recalled the Dora of

Dickens,"[78] called her little, as did Canadian Magazine;[79] while Alan Dale, in his fine article in Cosmopolitan, described her as small.[80] The critics were astonished by her size in A Doll's House because she had appeared so tall in Hedda Gabler. Through the creation of an apparent discrepancy in size Nazimova, ever the master of illusion, had taken an important step toward critical acclaim.

At the opening of A Doll's House the character of Nora is the epitome of the happy little child-wife. Nazimova revealed the child-wife quality through the rapid movements of her agile body. Variously described as "kittenish,"[81] "fluttering,"[82] perhaps there is value in noting the bird image in the following poem which Le Roy Arnold wrote after viewing Nazimova's portrayal of Nora.

A Doll's House

Laughing eyes and saucy heels,
And rowdy ringlets blowing,
Pretty blackbird, in she reels,
With Christmas gladness glowing.

Besides resorting to animal images critics frequently mentioned the happiness of Nazimova's Nora and the speed with which she moved during the first act of the play. Harper's Weekly describes the character "as radiant as an April day,"[83] and her persistant laughter is repeatedly recorded. John Webber gives a typical description of the endearing child-wife.

> We had a chattering little girl-wife, short skirted quick in speech, quick in action, who romped with children like a girl in her teens or nibbled forbidden sweets.[84]

The overall picture of the actress's portrait is even further clarified by a comment which appeared in the Atlanta Constitution. "Prone upon her stomach she friskly kicks her heels with a resounding tatoo."[85] Nazimova had evidently created a very endearing and specific physical character in her Nora.

During the first act of the play Nazimova spoke quite quickly to reinforce her physical characterization. Almost every review describes her "chattering;"[86] but, in addition, her speech is frequently described as indistinct, although there is no mention of any Russian accent. An article in Current Literature observed that her speech was a "baffling babble,"[87] and the writer in Harper's Weekly complained about the pace at which she spoke, indicating that the "pitch to which her tones often rise, blur the words with unfortunate completeness."[88] The other aspects of Nazimova's portrayal were so excellent, however, that critics generally did not emphasize her vocal problems.

During the second act of A Doll's House the actress playing Nora must begin to indicate the character change which will allow the final moments of the play to be acceptable to the audience. Elisabeth Cary believed that the way Nazimova handled this change made the central

problem of the play, Nora's immaturity, come to the forefront for the first time.[89] In her discerning article in Putnam's Monthly Mrs. Cary emphasizes Nazimova's consistency of character. After describing the actress's appealing childishness in the first act, the author observes that though the childishness seemed mechanical and almost reaches the point of irritating the viewer, Nazimova's shrewd characterization is more clearly understood when she tells Helmer late in the play that although she thought she was happy, she was actually living a lie.[90]

Another problem that an actress has to solve when planning a portrayal of Nora is the evident dichotomy between the child-wife seen at the opening of the play and the clear-headed young woman who walks out of the door as the play ends. The solution to the problem lies in a sensitive depiction of Nora's developing awareness of the futility of her current life. This transformation was one of the triumphs of the Nora created by Nazimova. The critic of Theatre clearly described the transformation.

> It is a creation not intermittently inspiring but a sustained and soul revealing study of the ingenuous side as well of the profound depths of Nora's misunderstood character. There was particular graciousness of deep affection in the scenes with the children. The interviews with Dr. Rank were graphically expressed in many illuminating details of light and shade and the tarantella was executed with much natural and sensuous charm. But it was

> in the final act that Madame Nazimova revealed the full sweep and depth of her natural art. Her repose is marvelous in its expressiveness, and when the true weakness of her husband's character was revealed her instant appreciation of the wide gulf that separates their goals was delivered with a wild outburst of righteous indignation that was electrifying in its effect. From that point on to her departure the studied calm was splendidly impressive.[91]

Students of Nazimova's Nora noted the calm approach the actress took to the third act of the play. Forsaking bombast for profundity, her final moments were admirable for their restraint. The critic from Nation describes the scene. "Her treatment of the final scene with Helmer is administered in its utter simplicity and its quiet misery of heartbreaking disillusion."[92] Both Nation and Theatre indicate that the calm of the scene was shattered only at the revelation of Helmer's character defect.

> When the weakness of her husband's character was revealed her instant appreciation of the wide gulf that separates their souls were delivered with a wide outburst of righteous indignation that was electrifying in its effect.[93]

Nazimova's performance in that first production of A Doll's House was so astonishing to the critics that they hardly spared a word to discuss the performances of the other actors in the production. One negative vote was sounded by the then dramatic editor of the New York Tribune, William Winter. Described as a critic who "belligerantly opposed the realistic movement in plays and in acting,"[94] Winter was a notorious Ibsen hater.

When Ghosts opened in New York in 1894 he called it "one of the most unpleasant of the many unpleasant productions of the Norwegian crank Mr. Ibsen."[95] Winter did not review Nazimova in Hedda Gabler. He did review A Doll's House, however, evidently challenged by an advertisement for Hedda Gabler which was placed in his own paper and contained favorable quotes from other newspaper critics as well as actors. Clifford Ashby describes the event.

> Following the opening of A Doll's House, an unsigned review couched in Winter's most venomous accents, observed that, "Mrs. Gabler's diseased condition has been on view for some time, but the votaries of the matinee cannot refresh themselves with the semi-infantile, semi-hysterical, altogether idiotic proceedings of Mrs. Helmer." While terming the play "hackneyed, insipid and tedious," he did grudgingly concede that "Mme. Nazimova is a pretty woman, from Russia, who uses the English language in an effective manner, although with difficulty."[96]

According to Ashby, a second negative vote was put in by William Gillette. He enjoyed the vogue for the personality actor and presumably did not like Nazimova's demonstration of her willingness to submerge her personality in order to create a more believable character.

While William Winter and the actor William Gillette disagreed with the awesome raves of their compatriots, their influence was hardly noticed as critic after critic indulged in long, thoughtful articles on the evident arrival of a new, natural style of acting.[97] Nation's critic stated:

> By her performance in the Princess Theatre on Monday afternoon Madame Alla Nazimova has clearly established her right to be placed in the first class of living actresses, if not in the highest division of it.[98]

Continually interviewed after her triumphant performance, the actress gave some insight into her feelings about Ibsen's Nora. Owen Johnson revealed that Nazimova had felt certain that A Doll's House would not be a success. Immersed in the role of Hedda, she had found it difficult to memorize Nora's "long, chattering speeches."[99] This feeling of depression lasted until the opening performance when

> she seized the character and played it with such authority that she produced the impression of a rendering studied out to the minutest detail. Yet it is literally true that most of her effects were improvised.[100]

In an article in the Independent Nazimova described the character of Nora. Noting that the character appealed more to women than to men, she stated that some men did understand the child-wife. "They realize that her action in leaving her doll's house was forced upon her."[101] Nazimova pointed out that Nora had been fashioned into a doll by the belittling attitudes of her father, husband and children. Observing that "there is the material for a good woman in her, if she has a chance to develop;"[102] Nazimova emphasized the finality of Nora's exit from the house at the end of the play. "The scene is wonderfully intense, and her words come with swift dynamic force,

every word striking true as a hammer on the human conscience."[103] Since some actresses had modified the final exit by subtly indicating that Nora would return, it is easy to believe that Nazimova's strong assertion of the permanency of the departure emphasized the assertion of women's rights inherent in Ibsen's original intent.

In 1918 Nazimova recreated Nora in her season of Ibsen repertory at the Plymouth Theatre under the direction of Arthur Hopkins. Although the production was more favorably reviewed that her other performances that season, it certainly did not receive the extravagant praise so noteworthy of the actress's first performance as Nora. Nazimova may have introduced a new acting style to America by her performances as Hedda and Nora in 1907, but by 1918 most of the actors and actresses in the United States were employing a more realistic style. In contrast, Nazimova herself, twenty years away from her exposure to Nemirovitch-Dantchenko, Stanislavsky and Orleneff, had almost developed into the kind of personality actress which Alan Dale had so reviled when he praised Nazimova's realistic work in her first production of A Doll's House.

John Corbin, the New York Times critic, gives an edifying description of the Nora Nazimova created in 1918. Criticizing her costumes, her inarticulate speech, her mannerisms, Corbin nevertheless commended her technical

ability and concluded by stating that "the performance may be commended. Her technical cleverness and the vigor of her personality have never been more fortunately in evidence."[104]

Nazimova never returned to theatrical performances of Nora.[105] It is certain, however, that there were many in the United States who believed along with Eva Le Gallienne's mother that, particularly in 1907, Alla Nazimova was "the finest Nora"[106] they had ever seen.

The two productions of A Doll's House in which Nazimova appeared on American stages in 1907 and 1918 received contrasting reviews, as did the two productions of Hedda Gabler. The mannerisms which were creeping into her performances, even in Ibsen, were not as noticeable in her Nora as in her Hedda, so A Doll's House was not as severely criticized as Hedda Gabler. Even John Corbin found redeeming factors in the production and performance which overcame some of the impact of the change Nazimova appeared to have made in her acting style. In The Master Builder, another early Nazimova vehicle, mannerisms were not mentioned by most critics, although they did find considerable fault with the actress's ability to handle the English language.

The Master Builder.--The play called Ibsen's "confessional of disillusion,"[107] featuring Alla Nazimova and Walter Hampden, opened at the Bijou Theatre in New York

City on September 23, 1907. It was directed by Henry Miller and gave Nazimova the role of Hilda Wangler, which she remembered years later as her favorite part.[108] Running for an exceptional sixty-five performances, the production was almost universally acclaimed by the critics in New York City. Throughout Nazimova's career the actress received the bulk of critical attention in reviews of the productions in which she was featured. In The Master Builder, however, Walter Hampden received the most attention and the more favorable reviews.

The role of Hilda Wangler, a startlingly independent and confident young woman, was well suited to the talents of the resourceful Nazimova. On her first entrance, dressed in a hiking costume, the actress clearly established the character of the contradictory girl, making her fascinating because of her contrasting moods of mischeviousness and pathos. Since Hampden was also giving an arresting performance as The Master Builder, the fascination extended to both leading roles and undoubtedly increased the impact of the somber drama. Hampden's performance was described as "monumental in its rugged grandeur,"[109] while Nazimova was said to be adding "another triumph to her record since adopting the English speaking stage."[110]

Nazimova, who believed that The Master Builder contained more of the true Ibsen than any of his other

plays, felt that the play was realistic rather than symbolic.[111] She demonstrated this realistic approach through the way she created the character of Hilda. The critic in Theatre observed, "Hers is a wonderful characterization as complete, rounded and polished as a diamond leaving the cutter's expert hands." He continued,

> It is an inspiration for the younger actresses of today to note the marvelous resourcefulness of this gifted player's comprehensive art. There is not a dull moment in it. The variety of expression, vocal and facial, is a little short of wonderful. The detail is perfect, and the methods of expression illuminate to the highest degree. The keynote which she strikes at her first entrance conveys at once the elf-like, mischeviously serious soul that pervades this fascinating but disturbing factor in the history of the Solness household. There is cheerful humor in her moments of playfulness; soul-felt poetry in her flights into the realm of profound yet alluring fancy; force and power in her delineation of the wonderful spell she yields, and mournful pathos in her notes of anguish.[112]

This descriptive and enthusiastic review was typical of the critical response to Nazimovova's Hilda.

The only strong criticism of Nazimova's performance came from that seasoned Ibsen censurer, William Winter. He noted that in her portrayal

> there was nothing remarkable aside from its brilliant animation and variety of feminine enticements and pretty wiles. The actress used the customary blandishments of her sex,--which are not difficult to use and are either captivating or melancholy, according to the eyes that see them.[113]

While admitting that "she showed herself a competent performer,"[114] he nevertheless sounded a familiar note as he complained about her inability to deliver the

English language without misemphasis and mispronunciation. According to the sage of American theatre criticism, she "made fritters of the English language and contorted her face in making them."[115] Throughout her career Nazimova was criticized for the problems she had with the English language.[116] In fact, in Sheila Graham's book The Garden of Allah, it is reported that for some time Nazimova pronounced the name of her favorite playwright as Isben.[117]

With The Master Builder Nazimova had achieved another great critical success on the American stage. As Theatre magazine recommended: "See it and be convinced that this Russian has a real message to convey, and reveals it with consumate and artistic grasp."[118]

Between The Master Builder and Nazimova's next Ibsen production, Little Eyolf, the actress attempted two popular dramas. One play was reasonably successful and one failed, but each gave the actress an opportunity to develop further her tendency to employ physical mannerisms to communicate the inner feelings of her characters. The mannerisms were evident in Little Eyolf and they were judged inappropriate for the work of the master playwright.

Little Eyolf.--With Nazimova as Rita Allmers, Little Eyolf opened at the newly constructed Nazimova Theatre on April 18, 1910. The actress's individualized portrayal

caught the critics' attention, and, although many felt that the production was not faithful to the author's intent, made the play memorable.

> It may not be Ibsen, but it is magnificent just the same. Her [Nazimova's] genius expresses itself in a continually astonishing vividness, a physical virtuosity that strikes the eye and senses, startles, thrusts, dazzles if it rarely reaches the noble tragic note. Genius, of its kind it is nevertheless.[119]

Walter Prichard Eaton liked the production so much that he found it difficult to conceive that anyone could improve on Nazimova's performance as Rita. While the jealousy displayed by Rita in the first act was clearly an emotion exceptionally well suited to the physical virtuosity and emotional power of a typical Nazimova performance, he observed his surprise in finding "that her later acts, and especially the conclusion of the play would be informed with deep feeling and a beautiful haunting sincerity, rising at the close to a true spiritual mobility."[120]

Nazimova's performance in that first act was described by most of the critics. The Daily Mirror felt that she "gave a thrilling picture of transfixed horror"[121] at the end of the first scene. Eaton added that the audience was transfixed even after the curtain fell.[122]

Dissatisfied comments were made by several reporters. Theatre described the production as "tedious

and unnecessarily offensive,"[123] but felt that Nazimova did the best she could with the part. Arthur Ruhl, noting that the part of Rita is normally played as "an old-fashioned stage witch,"[124] stated that Nazimova generally fell into the pattern already established by previous productions of Little Eyolf.

Praise for the production was frequent. Eaton, in his long and laudatory article in At the New Theatre, glowingly described Nazimova's communication of the tenderness and devotion underlying the vicious woman she portrayed in the first act, her sincere remorse in the second act, and her vivid assertion of Rita's return to rationality at the end of the play.[125]

The Shuberts made their star responsible for the stage direction of this production; most critics observed that the play was well staged. A review in a New York paper stated that the play was "revealed in a vivid, logical, convincing manner, which bespeaks the guiding hand of a master of stage craft."[126] Eaton was especially delighted with the mood created by the director at the final curtain of the play.

> It was beautifully planned and executed, a work of the finest and most intelligent imagination and suffused with the glamour of poetry.[127]

Unfavorable reviews of Little Eyolf were turned in by a minority of the commentators writing about the production. William Winter, who continually expressed

his dislike of Ibsen and Nazimova, included the actress as a member of the "twisting, twining, quivering, serpentine sisterhood, . . ."[128] as he described Nazimova's physical portrayal of Rita's anguish. Not alone in his derogation of the actress, he was nevertheless her most frequent detractor. John Brady noted that although the role of Rita Allmers did not give the actress many opportunities to "stretch her neck and show the whites of her eyes,"[129] she took every opportunity she got.

The reviews of Little Eyolf frequently employed the word mannerism, a word which was to be emphasized in the criticism of Nazimova's work over the next ten years. By 1910 the actress had spent some years touring the country and one critic remarked that although in Little Eyolf Nazimova "again demonstrated her remarkable gift for interpreting the Ibsen women,"[130] her performance was damaged by the mannerisms she had developed while touring. John Brady felt that the "road experience has not benefited her art, which always verged on the theatrical and needs repression."[131] Little Eyolf was the first Ibsen play in which Nazimova's mannerisms were frequently mentioned and censured by the critics.

Tied in with the comments about Nazimova's mannerisms are repeated statements describing the slender, mobile body which the actress utilized so freely. Although Winter deplored her constant activity onstage,

other critics were more willing to accept her continal physical demonstrations of the inner feelings of the characters she portrayed. In contrast, the actress was evidently capable of a transfixing stillness. Eaton describes the way she "slowly lifted her face and then her hands to the heavens"[132] just before the curtain closed on Little Eyolf. Nazimova's body was variously described as "plastic,"[133] "snaky,"[134] and "singularly, almost uncannily expressive."[135] Throughout her long career she was particularly noted for her long, expressive neck.

Madame Nazimova's voice was repeatedly described in reviews of Little Eyolf. Eaton describes her "deep, sweet voice,"[136] but the most frequent vocal evaluations at this stage in her career cast aspersions on the star's ability to pronounce the English language intelligibly. The Chicago Tribune reviewer liked the production, but observed that it was "still necessary to follow Nazimova's English productions with a book."[137] William Winter was even more vehement.

> Very little of the text as spoken by Madame Nazimova and by some of her associates, reached the ear of the auditor, except as partially unintelligible sound, but perhaps that should be remembered as a mercy.[138]

Nazimova as Rita Allmers appeared on the stage at the Nazimova Theatre for forty-eight performances, a remarkable run for this rather mystic drama. While her

co-workers were hardly mentioned in the reviews of the production, an unusual note was sounded by Eaton. He felt that the performance of Brandon Tynan as Allmers was considerably improved by his exposure to Nazimova. He had eliminated the bombast and flourish of his previous performances and succumbed to Nazimova's more naturalistic style.[139]

Little Eyolf was the only production Nazimova ever appeared in at the Nazimova Theatre. Eaton raved about it, Winter vilified it; but once again Nazimova, especially in her first act performance, had brought special magic to the American stage. With Nazimova, Ibsen almost became popular theatre.

Several productions later, after the usual difficult search for a new play, Nazimova and her manager settled upon a popular drama called Bella Donna. The play proved so popular on tour that it tremendously increased the fame of its star, even though she never liked it and knew that it encouraged her tendency to overact, pose, and indulge in mannerisms while performing.

Popular Drama

Bella Donna, which Nazimova later described as the biggest success she ever had in America,[140] opened at the Empire Theatre in New York City on November 11, 1912. The role of Mrs. Chepstow, played in London by Mrs. Patrick Campbell, was assigned to Nazimova by her

manager, Charles Frohman. Neither Nazimova nor Frohman can have known what an enormous impact the play would have on the actress's career. Adapted by James Fagan from the novel by James Hichens, the story concerned the amorous affairs of an English adventuress.

Nazimova, well aware by 1912 that suitable plays were very rare, was forced to accept a role that she knew was unsuitable. She remembered,

> I begged Mr. Frohman . . . not to make me play it. I could not see myself as the author had conceived the part, but Frohman said for me to play it as I could feel it. I did the best I could.[141]

Whether or not Nazimova liked the role, Frohman had found a vehicle in which the public was eager to view the exotic actress.

Touring the country for two years after a brief run in New York, Bella Donna almost became another Monte Cristo. Critical reception of the play itself was generally disparaging. The Evening Post in New York remarked that "misguided effort has seldom been expended upon more worthless or less wholesome material."[142] The New York Times called the play "picturesque melodrama,"[143] and Alan Dale described it as "very foolish, and very crude, and even very amateurish," but his next words give an indication of the reasons for the success of the play when it toured the country.

> Luckily--oh, the genius of Charles Frohman! We had Nazimova to look at and to say "Ah!" at. She was really quite as good as fireworks, or one of those

> big scenes at the Hippodrome. She was as spectacular as an entire ballet, and as gorgeous as a compressed, tabloid idea of "The Daughter of Heaven."[144]

Admirers of Nazimova were fascinated by the reptilian creature Mrs. Chepstow became in her hands. In fact, according to Kirkland, "Mrs. Channing Pollock was engaged to publicize Nazimova's serpentine and pantherine qualities."[145] Frequently employing posturing, physical contortions, and facial nuances to communicate the inner feelings of even her Ibsen characterizations; Nazimova expressed Mrs. Chepstow's unfulfilled desire and wretched inner torment through overt theatrics. J. S. Metcalfe reported: "Her voice never seems to be that of a real woman. Her movements are only shifting from one studied pose to another, never the normal actions of a normal woman."[146] Kirkland pointed out that this was typical of Nazimova's behavior in plays like Bella Donna.

> When a part had no depths to illumine, she chose one aspect of it to magnify. She played Bella Donna not as a woman but as incarnate Evil. This fascinated and repelled her audiences, and drove the critics to describe her as "reptilian" and "inhuman."[147]

Several critics pointed out that the only reason the play succeeded on the road was the fact that it was "sensational." J. S. Metcalfe of Life magazine reported,

> It is quite as well that the title role should be entrusted to an actress of the Nazimova type. The whole thing is exotic and bizarre. Mrs. Chepstow is the heroine of a sensational drama and it is quite in keeping that the part should be played in sensational fashion. It may be incredible that any

> woman with so thoroughly British a name as Chepstow, even if only acquired by marriage, could be or become so Cleopatrish as Madame Nazimova makes . . . her. The principle seems to be that credibility may go hang if only the play and the impersonation can be made to create more or less of a sensation.[148]

Actresses creating "sensational" characters are of great interest to the general public, so as she toured the country Nazimova was continually interviewed. Although the actress, who did not enjoy the unceasing publicity, became increasingly irritable with the press, she made several revealing remarks about her attitude toward her career.

> "Do I like Bella Donna? Well she interests me. Bella Donna is the wickedest woman I have ever played. Do I like to play wicked women? Well, remember that I am an actress. We all of us who are sincere in the work toil for fame. And the greatest and most famous actress we have, made most of her reputation by playing wicked women. Sarah Bernhardt's name has never been linked with the ingenue type."[149]

The costumes worn by Nazimova in Bella Donna were prominently featured in all the publicity. The public was informed that the actress has designed them herself. In one interview Nazimova described the way she developed the concept for her gowns.

> I see a character, and then I see the sort of gown she should wear. It isn't a matter of current mode. It resolves itself into a picture. I know the coloring that means the most. I conceive the fabrics that will express the idea, and then I have them woven.[150]

The clothes that Nazimova designed for Mrs. Chepstow were difficult to walk in and were worn without corsets; but they were an important contributing factor to the

success of the production. Billboard felt that Nazimova and her clothes vied with one another for the attention of the audiences at Bella Donna.[151] In fact, the snake gowns she wore were so effective that an article in the New York Evening Mail announced that exact reproductions of Nazimova's dresses would be worn at a party in San Francisco.[152]

Curiously, although she portrayed an Englishwoman, Nazimova's voice and Russian accent were not mentioned in the majority of the reviews of the drama. Her mannerisms, in contrast, were described in almost all the reviews from all over the country. Variously delineated as totally inhuman because of her affectations,[153] concerned only with theatrical effect,[154] and considered by all to be distressingly artificial, critical response to the actress at this stage in her career seems to be summed up in the following extract from a review of Bella Donna.

> Although Madame Nazimova heightens the bizarre, exotic effect of the drama by her strange interpretation of Bella Donna, she makes the character everything but human. Her performance is a curious exhibition of studied poses and physical contortions. So overloaded with mannerisms is her acting that she is dramatically effective only in her encounter with the London physician at the climax.[155]

Nazimova's career was inevitably altered by the three years she spent playing Mrs. Chepstow in Bella Donna. Although she hated the play and knew that she was miscast in the role, the public came to think of the

actress as the kind of woman she was portraying. Sensational journalism encouraged audiences to believe that her ability to vividly characterize a wicked woman meant that Nazimova herself was infamous. And, certainly, that was the way the public wanted to see Nazimova behave on the stage.

Nazimova's refusal to continue playing the role of Mrs. Chepstow caused her break with Charles Frohman and eventually led to the establishment of her own management company. Bella Donna introduced the actress to Charles Bryant, with whom she would work closely for the next dozen years. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the role in Bella Donna encouraged the actress to develop further the theatrical mannerisms of movement and gesture which made her acting seem the antithesis of the rather natural style which delighted the critics who saw her when she first performed in the United States.

Plays like Bella Donna frustrated critics because most of them felt that the actress was worthy of better material. After she became her own manager Nazimova found a popular drama for which critics felt she was better suited. The play, which was Nazimova's first venture as a producer, was written by H. Austin Adams and entitled 'Ception Shoals.[156] Directed by Walter Wanger, a young Dartmouth graduate, the production opened at the Princess Theatre on January 10, 1917. 'Ception

Shoals gave Nazimova a role totally different from the wicked woman she had hated playing in Bella Donna. In the tragic tale of the the innocent niece of a gruff lighthouse keeper, the actress portrayed the virginal Eve. During the action of the play the peace of the remote lighthouse is violated by a shipwrecked sailor, and the young girl is introduced to the corruption of the world. Eventually betrayed by the sailor she loves, the story ends as Eve is driven to insanity.

Nazimova, in her new role as producer, described the play in an interview with Theatre. She maintained that the play revealed

> . . . a plea and a protest. . . . It protests against the perverted thing that is grim and cruel and false in the name of religion, and it pleads for a life illuminated by the light.[157]

Comparing the play to Ibsen's dramas, the actress observed that 'Ception Shoals contained as much symbolism as The Wild Duck or Little Eyolf.

Pleas, protests and symbolism rarely make for popular drama, so the reviews of 'Ception Shoals were mixed. Most critics found the play inferior. Theatre described it as "doleful obstetrical drama;"[158] and Robert Benchley, substituting for P. G. Wodehouse at Vanity Fair, complained that the play was offensive and "too tragic for anyone."[159]

Although they were evidently unimpressed with the playwright's work, the critics were struck by

Nazimova's portrayal of the suffering Eve. The Philadelphia Bulletin observed, "Nazimova gives a remarkable suggestion of young innocence, of awakening womanhood and a tragic realization of its suffering."[160] The New York Times agreed that the simplicity of Eve was successfully portrayed.[161] Universal praise was accorded Nazimova's slim figure, fully revealed in a bathing-suit like costume at the opening of the play. Finally, although the Bulletin considered the mad scene "somewhat overwrought in its intensity,"[162] critics agreed that audiences were thrilled by Nazimova's intense portrayal of insanity in the final moments of the play.

Nazimova's mannerisms and vocal eccentricities were accorded their customary space in the reviews of 'Ception Shoals, but the criticism was moderated by the winning individuality of the character the actress had created. The Philadelphia Bulletin reported:

> She still has some mannerisms, some strangeness of attitude and gesture that strike one as unnatural, and a slight remaining trace of foreign accent, but there is an individuality in all that she does, and she has at will the ability to interest, to hold and stir the enthusiasm.[163]

'Ception Shoals was not an ideal vehicle for the perplexingly limited actress; the play only ran for a few weeks. In her first attempt at management, however, Nazimova had found a role which gave the actress an opportunity to display another side of her mercurical acting talent.

Ibsen in Repertory: The Wild Duck

During 1918 Nazimova, rapidly developing new fame as a star of the silent screen, announced that she would perform in a repertory season of Ibsen's plays directed by the gifted young Arthur Hopkins. To the astonishment of Ibsen connoisseurs, the opening play was the first English presentation of The Wild Duck in New York, and featured Madame Nazimova, now forty-two years old, as the fourteen year old Hedvig. Hedvig was one of a series of youthful roles which Nazimova attempted between 1918 and 1925.

Directed by Arthur Hopkins, designed by Robert Edmond Jones, and starring the only actress in the United States who had ever made Ibsen appeal to the common man, The Wild Duck opened on March 11, 1918 at the Plymouth Theatre. The reviews were mixed. While the New York Dramatic Mirror critic was enchanted by Nazimova's performance as Hedvig, John Corbin of the New York Times took up William Winter's role as chief derogator and cast aspersions on the whole season presented by Hopkins.

Clayton Hamilton described the eminent director's production approach in the June, 1918 Bookman.

> Mr. Hopkin's method of production is founded sanely on the theory that it is better to leave a play alone, to work its will on the spectator, than to attempt to decorate or to embellish or even interpret it.[164]

This method may be very appropriate for the plays of Ibsen but it seems to contradict Nazimova's style of acting. Continually described as overtly portraying the inner feelings of her characters, Nazimova may have found it difficult to fit in with the Hopkins' concept.

The role of the fourteen year old Hedvig, although her fate is keenly followed by the audience, is not the primary character in The Wild Duck. Nazimova's assumption of the role, however, whether or not it was suited to her particular skills, twisted the focus of the production so that it rested upon her slender shoulders. Probably only playing a man's role would have brought more attention to her performance. The critical response to the play reflects this convolution. The Ekdal of Lionel Atwill is barely mentioned in the reviews, even though he was a fairly well-known actor.

The criticism focused on Nazimova's performance. The Dramatic Mirror pointed out that there were "many who came to scoff"[165] at the actress, but vindicated this aspersion by admitting that the scoffers stayed to cheer.[166] According to the astonished critic: "She looked like a child, she acted as one, even to the funny little walk that children have; she was the very embodiment of all that was twelve."[167] The Bookman's Clayton Hamilton agreed that Nazimova "acquitted herself with credit."[168] In reviewing the Hopkins-Nazimova season

in later years, however, Joseph Wood Krutch did not believe that Nazimova made a very convincing Hedvig.

> . . . she appeared to be the very embodiment of a morbid exoticism. I can still see her as she shook the bobbed hair out of her heavy eyes and can still remember how perfectly she symbolized, not Ibsen to be sure, but the whole world of un-American sensibilities.[169]

John Corbin, who wrote about Nazimova's Hedvig as well as her Hedda and Nora, was thoroughly disenchanted with the actress's performance as the young girl. Noting in the review immediately following the performance that she was "the one positive blemish on the production,"[170] he went on to state that "throughout she played at the part instead of embodying it--with the result that her performance was thoroughly mechanical and disillusioning."[171] In his Sunday piece Corbin admitted that the actress fabricated the movements of a child, but he felt that the childishness was exploited.[172] Reiterating a familiar complaint he noted that, although Nazimova had been performing in English for over a decade, it was still very difficult to understand her stage speech, even in the first rows of seats in the theatre. And, sounding a new note, he complained,

> We have had actresses before who won a certain popularity by exploiting personality; but their careers have been fortunately short. Nazimova apparently differs from her predecessors mainly in the fact that she has used as her vehicles a number of very interesting plays, which might otherwise have been more adequately produced.[173]

Ten years before Alan Dale almost deified Nazimova because she appeared to be the antithesis of the personality actress. According to Corbin she had made a complete reversal.

The Wild Duck followed by Hedda Gabler and A Doll's House occupied Nazimova in New York City for approximately three months. When the short repertory season was over she moved out to California and started making films in earnest. The Ibsen plays had once again proved unattractive to the public, and this time Nazimova had not even received good reviews.

Nazimova's Ibsen Roles

It seems fitting that the first phase of Nazimova's career in the theatre can be said to have begun and ended with performances in the plays of Henrik Ibsen. Between 1906 and 1918 Nazimova performed in five plays by the Norwegian playwright. In fact, there is no doubt that the playwright whose work Nazimova performed most frequently in the United States was Ibsen. In English on the American stage she eventually performed in Hedda Gabler, A Doll's House, The Master Builder, Little Eyolf, The Wild Duck, and Ghosts. Two of these plays were repeated several times during her career. Hedda Gabler was performed in 1906, 1918 and 1936. She did A Doll's House in 1907, repeated the play during the Hopkins' repertory season in 1918, and made a film of the play

in 1922. Shortly after the production of Ghosts in 1935 in New York City a critic wrote:

> What Arnold Daly did for Shaw, Nazimova did for Ibsen. Probably no other individual has offered so much in popularizing the Scandinavian dramatist in this country. It is said that no other actress has played as many performances of Ibsen heroines as Nazimova. This despite the fact, if the records have been studied carefully, that seventeen years have elapsed since, in 1918, she gave her last season of Ibsen repertory in this city.[174]

Although Nazimova's performances of Ibsen's women were not always favorably reviewed, undoubtedly the actress deserves the statement about her which appeared in the Oxford Companion to the Theatre: "She was considered an outstanding exponent of Ibsen's heroines."[175]

Since Nazimova achieved a large measure of her success in Ibsen's plays it seems valuable to explore her statements about his work. Ibsen was certainly the playwright who brought Nazimova many of her most favorable reviews, although in one interview the actress indicated that Strindberg, rather than Ibsen, was her favorite playwright.[176]

Throughout Nazimova's career in the theatre she continually emphasized that she liked to portray roles that gave her something to think about. Ibsen always did. In one interview the actress stated, "I rebel against the eternal love theme in drama. Always woman represents love. I would rather play a woman like Hilda in The Master Builder."[177] Another reviewer reported that

Nazimova had said:

> I played Zaza and some characters like that. But I detest them, I hate them! They don't give the actress anything to think about. Consider how many passions and motives and characters men have a chance to interpret. With women it is always the same sort of thing--always the man and the woman and the result.[178]

In contrast, in Ibsen, Nazimova had to "think, think, think,"[179] and all the thinking proved worthwhile because the characters were so complex that the actor "got some new light on them all the time."[180] Ibsen gave Nazimova what she was looking for in a play.

> What I like is an idea to work out. You play pieces night after night in a mechanical way, and the actress is never able to vary them. Each interpretation is the same and it is appalling.[181]

Nazimova also believed that Ibsen gave the reasoning performer a great deal of insight into the characters he had written. "Ibsen opens a window into the soul of his characters through which you can look and see them as they are--and often see something of yourself, too."[182] In addition, Nazimova trusted Ibsen's understanding of the women he created in his plays. "I do not think any other writer understands the souls of women as he does. He picks out some little thing that you do not notice and shows you a whole world in it. There is no end to Ibsen."[183]

Many reviewers praised Nazimova for her sympathetic portraits of the characters that the Norwegian dramatist wrote for the stage. Here is an example

from the Boston Transcript.

> She knows the inner springs and the inner consequences of their ideas and their actions, and her acting becomes a magnet that draws and opens their spirits. Her unique gift is an eclectic suggestiveness that draws forth and makes audible and visible the underlying thought or feeling, that makes the spectator understand and respond to it, that, whether she speaks or moves, listens or is still, makes her acting a kind of magnetic mirror of things beneath.[184]

The low point in critical response to Nazimova's interpretation of Ibsen's heroines came in the Hopkins' repertory season of 1918 when the mannerisms that she developed to enhance poor dramas suddenly became evident in her portraits in the works of the master dramatist. Her most virulent attacker at that time was John Corbin of the New York Times.

> Madame Nazimova has cast the trail of her alien personality, of shallow, sensation-seeking art, over one after another of the great Ibsen heroines, and in doing so she has pretty effectively killed for the public of the present all possible interest in them.[185]

Although Corbin's criticism was more acrimonious than that of the other reviewers of the period, he was joined by his colleagues in noting that Nazimova, the respected Ibsen actress, did not seem to be performing as effectively as she had in the past.

When Nazimova returned to Ibsen in the 1930s, however, most criticism was once again laudatory, particularly for her portrayal of Mrs. Alving in Ghosts. Arthur Hopkins, the director of the 1918 repertory season,

saw Nazimova perform in Ghosts and found her work superb, even though he had never thought of her for the role. "She showed the full meaning of that guilty and stricken mother, and came into the acclaim that she had been too long denied."[186] In fact, throughout Nazimova's career in the theatre, it seems valid to classify the actress, "the official Ibsen star," just as Newsweek stated in its obituary for the renowned actress.[187]

Footnotes

[1]Frank Philip Morse, Backstage with Henry Miller (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1938), p. 42.

[2]Alan Dale, "Nazimova and Some Others," Cosmopolitan, XLII (April, 1907), 675.

[3]Ibid., p. 676.

[4]Clifford C. Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLV (April, 1959), 188.

[5]New York Times, November 14, 1906, 9:3.

[6]Dale, "Nazimova and Some Others," op. cit., p. 676.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Owen Johnson, "Madame Alla Nazimova," Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine, LXXIV (June, 1907), 219.

[9]Ada Patterson, "An Interview with a Multiple Woman," Theatre, VII (August, 1907), 219.

[10]Morse, Backstage with Henry Miller, op. cit., p. 48.

[11]Review, Theatre, VII (June, 1907), 144.

[12]Unidentified newspaper clipping dated December 13, 1907, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[13]Morse, Backstage with Henry Miller, op. cit., p. 48.

[14]Louis De Foe, "Nazimova At Last Meets Her Big Promise," Green Book Magazine, XIII (May, 1915), 910.

[15]Unidentified newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[16]New York Times, December 31, 1907, 7:4.

[17]Walter Prichard Eaton, American Stage of Today (Boston: Small, Maynard and Co., 1908), p. 168.

[18]Ibid.

[19]William Winter, The Wallet of Time (New York: Moffat, Yard and Co., 1909), p. 585.

[20]Walter Prichard Eaton, At the New Theatre (Boston: Small, Maynard and Co., 1910), p. 168.

[21]Oliver Sayler, Our American Theatre (New York: Brentanos, 1923), p. 290.

[22]Boston Transcript, September 14, 1910, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[23]Chicago Tribune, September 14, 1910, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[24]Unidentified newspaper clipping dated February 15, 1911, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[25]New York Telegraph, August 22, 1911, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[26]Chicago Record, October 4, 1911, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[27]Herald Tribune (New York), March 20, 1932, 12:1.

[28]Unidentified newsaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[29]Magda Frances West, "Nazimova's Views on Love, Husbands and Wicked Women," Green Book Magazine, XIV (March, 1913), 418.

[30]New York Times, August 7, 1925, 8:1.

[31]New York Times, December 6, 1925, 20:2.

[32]Letter, Alla Nazimova to Leone Scott, May 11, 1931, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[33]De Witt Bodeen, "Nazimova," Films in Review, XXIII (December, 1972), 596.

[34]Philadelphia Times, June 15, 1913, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[35]Unidentified newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[36]Review, Theatre, XVII (February, 1917), 32.

[37]Morning Telegraph, March 24, 1917, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[38]Arthur Hopkins, To a Lonely Boy (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1937), p. 163-64.

[39]John Corbin, New York Times, May 5, 1918, 8:1.

[40]Howard Taubman, The Making of the American Theatre (New York: Coward McCann, 1965), p. 155.

[41]Marguerite Courtney, Laurette (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 249.

[42]New York Times, January 23, 1923, 18:2.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Kenneth MacGowan, Boston Globe, January 24, 1923, Players Collection, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[45]Lawrence Langner, G. B. S. and the Lunatic (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 61.

[46]Louis Untermeyer, "Nazimova as Hedda Gabler," Theatre, VII (August, 1907), 219.

[47]Morse, Backstage with Henry Miller, op. cit., p. 46.

[48]Johnson, "Madame Alla Nazimova," op. cit., p. 222.

[49]Ida M. Gibson, unidentified newspaper clipping dated November 6, 1908, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[50]Randolph Goodman, From Script to Stage (New York: Rinehart Press, 1971), p. 32-33.

[51]"Madame Nazimova in A Doll's House," Nation, LXXXIV (January 17, 1907), 65.

[52]John E. Webber, "Acting of Nazimova," Canadian Monthly, XXVIV (June, 1907), 131.

[53]Elisabeth Luther Cary, "Madame Nazimova's Nora and Hedda," Putnam's Monthly, VII (April, 1907), 76.

[54]Webber, "Acting of Nazimova," op. cit., p. 130.

[55]"Acting and English of Nazimova," Harper's Weekly, LI (February 16, 1907), 240.

[56]Ibid.

[57]"Hedda Gabler," Theatre, VI (December, 1906), xxii.

[58]"Madame Nazimova in A Doll's House," op. cit., p. 65.

[59]Mrs. Thomas Whiffen, Keeping Off the Shelf (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1928), pp. 176-77.

[60]Johnson, "Madame Alla Nazimova," op. cit., p. 220.

[61]Patterson, "An Interview with a Multiple Woman," op. cit., p. 220.

[62]Alla Nazimova, "Ibsen's Women," Independent, LXIII (October 17, 1907), 910.

[63]Henry James Forman, "New Histrionic Genius and Her Art," Harper's Weekly, LI (April 20, 1907), 576.

[64]"Russian Artiste Becomes an American Star," Theatre, VII (January, 1907), vii.

[65]Nazimova, "Ibsen's Women," op. cit., p. 910.

[66]Goodman, From Script to Stage, op. cit., p. 32.

[67]Morse, Backstage with Henry Miller, op. cit., p. 46.

[68]Goodman, From Script to Stage, op. cit., pp. 32-33.

[69]Clayton Hamilton, "Ibsen Once Again, Nazimova's Revival," Bookman, XXXXVII (June, 1918), 431.

[70]"Hedda Gabler," op. cit., p. xxii.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Ida M. Gibson, unidentified newspaper clipping dated November 26, 1908, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[73]Jean Graham, "A Russian Actress," Canadian Magazine, XXXII (March, 1909), 476.

[74]Webber, "Acting of Nazimova," op. cit., pp. 130-31.

[75]John Corbin, New York Times, April 9, 1918, 14:1.

[76]Johnson, "Madame Alla Nazimova," op. cit., p. 220.

[77]Ibid.

[78]"Madame Nazimova in A Doll's House," op. cit., p. 65.

[79]Webber, "Acting of Nazimova," op. cit., p. 131.

[80]Dale, "Nazimova and Some Others," op. cit., p. 674.

[81]"Madame Nazimova in A Doll's House," op. cit., p. 65.

[82]Webber, "Acting of Nazimova," op. cit., p. 131.

[83]"Acting and English of Nazimova," op. cit., p. 240.

[84]Webber, "Acting of Nazimova," op. cit., p. 131.

[85]Atlanta Constitution, December 27, 1910, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[86]Webber, "Acting of Nazimova," op. cit., p. 131.

[87]"Transformation of Nazimova," Current Literature, XLII (December, 1907), 672.

[88]"Acting and English of Nazimova," op. cit., p. 240.

[89]Cary, "Madame Nazimova's Nora and Hedda," op. cit., p. 73.

[90]Ibid., p. 74.

[91]"Madame Nazimova as Ibsen's Nora," Theatre, VII (March, 1907), 72.

[92]"Madame Nazimova in A Doll's House," op. cit., p. 65.

[93]"Madame Nazimova as Ibsen's Nora," op. cit., p. 72.

[94]Barnard Hewitt, Theatre U. S. A. (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1959), p. 493.

[95]William Winter, New York Tribune, January 26, 1894. Quoted in Hewitt, Theatre, U. S. A., op. cit., p. 261.

[96]Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," op. cit., p. 186.

[97]Dale, "Nazimova and Some Others," op. cit., p. 675.

[98]"Madame Nazimova in A Doll's House," op. cit., p. 65.

[99]Johnson, "Madame Alla Nazimova," op. cit., p. 220.

[100]Ibid.

[101]Nazimova, "Ibsen's Women," op. cit., p. 910.

[102]Ibid.

[103]Webber, "Acting of Nazimova," op. cit., p. 132.

[104]John Corbin, New York Times, May 5, 1918, 8:1.

[105]Nazimova did make a film version of A Doll's House in 1922.

[106]Eva Le Gallienne, With a Quiet Heart (New York: Viking Press, 1953), p. 43.

[107]"Transformation of Nazimova," op. cit., p. 672.

[108]This was reported in an interview after the production of Mourning Becomes Electra.

[109]Hamilton, "Ibsen Once Again, Nazimova's Revival," op. cit., p. 154.

[110]Review, Theatre, VII (November, 1907), 288.

[111]Ann Peacock, "Madame Nazimova to Enact Her Ideal Woman," Theatre, VII (September, 1907), 231.

[112]Review, Theatre, VII (November, 1907), 288.

[113]William Winter, The Wallet of Time (New York: Moffat, Yard and Co., 1909), p. 589.

[114]Ibid.

[115]Ibid.

[116]In a personal interview with the author on September 19, 1973 Mervyn Le Roy reported that as late as 1940, when he worked with Nazimova in Escape, the actress was worried about her accent. After shooting a scene Nazimova always asked if she could be understood.

[117]Shelia Graham, The Garden of Alla (New York: Crown Publishers, 1970), p. 14.

[118]Review, Theatre, VII (November, 1907), 288.

[119]Arthur Ruhl, "Nazimova Again," Collier's, VL (May 7, 1910), 34.

[120]Eaton, At the New Theatre, op. cit., p. 172.

[121]Daily Mirror, April 20, 1910, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[122]Eaton, At the New Theatre, op. cit., p. 172.

[123]Review, Theatre, X (June, 1910), viii.

[124]Ruhl, "Nazimova Again," op. cit., p. 34.

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[126]Unidentified review of Little Eyolf, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[127]Eaton, At the New Theatre, op. cit., p. 172.

[128]Winter, The Wallet of Time, op. cit., p. 590.

[129]John Brady, unidentified newspaper clipping dated May 1, 1910, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

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[131]Ibid.

[132]Eaton, At the New Theatre, op. cit., p. 74.

[133]Ruhl, "Nazimova Again," op. cit., p. 34.

[134]Ibid.

[135]"Transformation of Nazimova," op. cit., p. 672.

[136]Eaton, At the New Theatre, op. cit., p. 74.

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[141]Mary B. Mullett, "How a Dull, Fat Little Girl Became a Great Actress," American Magazine, XLIII (April, 1922), 114.

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[144]Los Angeles Examiner, November 25, 1912, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[145]Alexander Kirkland, "The Woman from Yalta," Theatre Arts Monthly, XXXIII (December, 1949), 28.

[146]J. S. Metcalfe, "A Serpent of the Nile and Farce Galore," Life, LX (November 28, 1912), 2288.

[147]Kirkland, "The Woman from Yalta," op. cit., p. 48.

[148]Metcalfe, " A Serpent of the Nile and Farce Galore," op. cit., p. 2288.

[149]Magda Frances West, "Nazimova's Views on Love, Husbands and Wicked Women," Green Book Magazine, IX (March, 1913), 415.

[150]Edith Kaufmann, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[151]Billboard, November 23, 1912, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[152]Evening Mail, November 12, 1912, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[153]New York Times, November 12, 1912, 13:5.

[154]Metcalfe, "A Serpent of the Nile and Farce Galore," op. cit., p. 2288.

[155]Unidentified newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[156]'Ception Shoals was made into a film entitled Out of the Fog which was released on February 9, 1919. Nazimova starred and Albert Capellani directed the picture.

[157]"Nazimova--An Apostle of the Drama," Theatre, XXV (March, 1917), 144.

[158]E. M. Gagey, Revolution in American Drama (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), p. 30.

[159]Graham, "A Russian Actress," op. cit., p. 476.

[160]Philadelphia Bulletin, May 8, 1917, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[161]New York Times, January 11, 1917, 13:1.

[162]Philadelphia Bulletin, May 8, 1917, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

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[164]Hamilton, "Ibsen Once Again, Nazimova's Revival," op. cit., p. 427.

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[169]Joseph Wood Krutch, "Museum Piece," Nation, CXXXVII (November, 1933), 606.

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[175]Phyllis Hartnoll, ed., Oxford Companion to the Theatre, 3rd. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 672.

[176]"An 'Interview' with Alla Nazimova," Equity Magazine, XLIV (May, 1959), 10.

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[180]Alan Dale, "Nazimova, the Inscrutable," Green Book Magazine, XV (February, 1916), 305.

[181]Ibid.

[182]Nazimova, "Ibsen's Women," op. cit., p. 909.

[183]Ibid., p. 914.

[184]Quoted in "Transformation of Nazimova," op. cit., p. 672.

[185]John Corbin, New York Times, April 14, 1918, sec. IV, 6:3-4.

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CHAPTER IV

VAUDEVILLE AND FILM CAREER

Biography

During Nazimova's career she explored most of the performing mediums available to an actress. She made several radio appearances, she starred in five short plays on the vaudeville stage and she appeared in seventeen silent films between 1915 and 1925 and five sound films in the early 1940s. Nazimova's rank as an actress is based primarily on her stage career, but vaudeville and film appearances constituted an important phase in her work before the American public.

The first step away from the legitimate stage came in 1915, during the halcyon days of vaudeville, when Nazimova joined the ranks of other great actresses like Sarah Bernhardt, Mrs. Patrick Campbell and Lily Langtry who had performed in dramatic one-act plays as part of the varied vaudeville bill of fare at the Palace theatre. By bringing top name stars to their theatres, the managers of the vaudeville circuits hoped to draw even larger audiences.

Nazimova made her vaudeville debut in Marion Craig Wentworth's anti-war drama, War Brides, on January 15, 1915. Topically resembling The Mother, the Nazimova 1939 anti-war vehicle, the timely one-act's audience appeal was considerably enhanced by its controversial statement about war at a time when war was imminent. While the New York Times critic found the drama "quite tiresome and one hardly likely to hold the interest of vaudeville audiences in general for the length of time it takes in the preaching,"[1] his sentiment was by no means universal. Theatre magazine reported:

> Madame Nazimova was never more natural, earnest and fiery than she is in the role of Hedwig, the passionate peasant champion of outraged womanhood. It is a remarkable performance, thrilling it its emotional intensity, soul stirring in the depths it sounds of human distress and pathos.[2]

Even though the critics were divided, the play was enough of a public success to keep it running for about a year on the vaudeville circuits. In fact, vaudeville's successful presentation of Nazimova in War Brides directly introduced the actress to her career in film. Before this is explored, however, it seems appropriate to complete a review of the actress's brief career in vaudeville.

Returning to the vaudeville circuits in 1923, Nazimova appeared in a short play by George Middleton entitled The Unknown Lady. The drama proved to be

controversial, however, and after the play reached the Palace in New York it was cancelled because a priest objected to the play's criticism of New York's strict divorce laws.

Nazimova appeared in three other short dramas on the Keith Vaudeville circuit. The first, in 1926, was a one-act version of That Sort, which the actress had starred in at the Harris Theatre in 1914. The second production was A Woman of the Earth, which opened at the Palace on February 1, 1927. In the short play Nazimova played a gypsy murderess who was eventually forced to confess her crime. The New York Times reviewer remarked that the drama gave the actress an opportunity for "displaying her telling though heavily underscored emotional acting."[3]

Following the New York engagement Nazimova took A Woman of the Earth to London, where she appeared on the stage for the first time in twenty-two years. The critics, while unimpressed with the playlet, generally applauded Nazimova's acting, which they had previously observed in the films she had made between 1915 and 1925. The following perceptive commentary by J. T. Grein appeared after the critic had seen Nazimova perform at the London Coliseum in A Woman of the Earth.

> There is no gainsaying that Nazimova is a great artist--in diction and in emotional power: she charges every word with meaning; she is eloquent

> in gesture; yet she seemed overcome by the welcome given to her, by reminiscences of the past, and nervousness bridled the fullness of her powers.[4]

Nazimova's final appearance in vaudeville came in another short play by Edgar Allen Wolf, author of A Woman of the Earth. Based on an excerpt from Mother India by Katherine Mayo, and entitled India, the drama reached the Palace on January 16, 1928. The New York Times found the sketch "pretty much of a mess,"[5] and was intensely critical of Nazimova's performance, particularly her voice.

> India is badly overwritten in a grandiose manner and as badly overacted. Nazimova, so tensely emotional that she hisses even her 'o's and 'n' letters, arouses almost no sympathy for the presumably much put-upon young wife.[6]

India, which was not favorably received, was Nazimova's last experience in vaudeville. During the tryout for the play in Bayonne, New Jersey the actress had collapsed from overwork and delayed her opening at the Palace.[7] It is almost certain that the strenuous schedule required of a vaudeville performer had been difficult for her to sustain. Difficult though it may have been, India proved to be the end of a frustrating era for the actress; shortly thereafter she opened in The Cherry Orchard and began what could be called a theatrical come-back.

Films occupied Nazimova almost totally between 1918 and 1925, and prior to that she made three films

between appearances in stage plays. The actress's first film was an adaptation of the vaudeville skit, War Brides. Nazimova's effective portrait of Joan in the vaudeville version of the play led Lewis J. Selznick to sign the actress to a contract to make a film version of the drama. Bob Thomas, in his book Selznick, tells of the unique terms of the financial agreement between Selznick and Nazimova.

> Alla Nazimova was one of the great name of the theatre, and L. J. sought the Russian actress for a screen version of her vaudeville success, War Brides. Nazimova sniffed at the presumption of the movie maker. She would consider his proposition only if she were paid a thousand dollars a day.
>
> To her surprise, Selznick answered: "I'll not only pay you a thousand dollars a day, but I'll pay you at the end of every working day!"
>
> Amid much publicity, L. J. handed Nazimova a thousand-dollar bill daily for thirty days. War Brides earned ten times what L. J. had paid her.[8]

War Brides, which was directed by Herbert Brennon, proved to be quite a successful silent film. "Distinguished by the fine acting of Nazimova, mass scenes, and dramatic tension, it was probably Brenon's best effort."[9] Critical response was good. The New York Times commented that Nazimova had justified the great interest in her first movie "by showing that she had adapted her talents to the new medium with unusual success."[10] In fact, the anti-war statement made by the film was so effective that Lewis Jacobs, in his

book The Rise of the American Film, states that the film had to be withdrawn from public performance after America entered into World War I.[11]

For Nazimova, War Brides had proved to be an excellent introduction to a prospective film career. Although in later years the actress denigrated the films she had made, it is certain that at the time of its release in 1916 War Brides was considered by all to have been a successful venture.

De Witt Bodeen's lengthy article entitled "Nazimova," which appeared in Films in Review in December, 1972, gives a detailed description of the film contract that Nazimova elected to sign with Metro after the success of War Brides had led many film companies to request her services. Bodeen revealed:

> It was an extraordinary contract which allowed her own production unit as well as approval of all stories, directors and casts. She was to be more than the mistress of her productions; she was acknowledged empress, with the power of any ultimate ukase, although the studio allowed itself loopholes which would curtail her doing Ibsen on the screen. For this contract she was guaranteed a splendid income starting at $13,000 a week, with raises.[12]

This contract was significant because it gave Nazimova the power to control her own film career. It gave her so much control that only the actress herself could be blamed for any failures, particularly in script selection.

The lucrative contract with Metro immediately transformed Nazimova into one of the first of the real "super-stars" of movies. As such she needed a home fitting her rank and salary. In 1918 she leased a house at 8150 Sunset Boulevard. For $50,000 Nazimova received a ninety-nine year lease on the big mansion which she called The Garden of Alla. The actress lived there with Charles Bryant throughout her silent film career. After passing out of her hands when her silent film career left her penniless, the house was transformed into a hotel called the Garden of Allah and became a legendary dwelling for the luminaries who visited Hollywood. Nazimova herself was allowed to live in a small apartment in the hotel whenever she visited the film capital. A legend in its own time, the house is immortalized in Shelia Graham's book The Garden of Allah.

Revelation, Nazimova's second film and her first effort in an association with Metro, who would produce her next ten films, was directed by George D. Baker in 1918. Adapted from a story by Mabel Wagnalls entitled The Rosebush of a Thousand Years, the rather mystic piece gave the actress the role of a young girl, of dubious morality, who became the model and sweetheart of an American painter. After the artist painted her as the Madonna of the Rosebush she reformed her life and eventually became a Red Cross nurse who rescued the painter when he fell upon

the battlefied.

Reviews of Revelation indicate that one of its chief pleasures was the opportunity to view Nazimova in a variety of moods. The Philadelphia Inquirer disclosed that "she is gay, bewitching, capricious as the madcap, while later as the Madonna of the Rosebush she is appealing, tender, pathetic, and then as Florence Nightingale of the battlefields, noble, self sacrificing."[13] The New York Times report on Nazimova's second film revealed that the actress had attended the premiere performance and been recognized by the audience. Her popularity was such that "the whole house greeted her with shouts and handclapping that did not cease until she had retreated from the box."[14] In fact, Revelation was a great success. The general public had heard of Nazimova and the film provided an opportunity to see her.

George D. Baker directed Nazimova in her second film at Metro, Toys of Fate. The film followed the adventures of a gypsy girl "whose mother commited suicide after a wealthy roue had lured her from the gypsies and then deserted her."[15] One newspaper reviewer called the 1918 film

> inferior melodrama, full of improbabilities and coincidences. The directing varies and the acting is over-intense almost throughout. Nazimova herself overplays at times, although she catches the

abandon and the fire of the little gypsy girl admirably.[16]

Four of Nazimova's silent films were released during the year 1919. All four were produced by Metro, and three of the four were directed by Albert Capellani. Two of the Capellani pictures, Out of the Fog and Red Lantern, were rated by Bodeen as the two best films Nazimova made for Metro. Out of the Fog was a film adaptation of Nazimova's 1917 stage play 'Ception Shoals, but in the picture the actress played both the fisher-girl Faith and her luckless Mother.

Critical response to Out of the Fog was gratifying; the New York Dramatic Mirror even found the film preferable to the play.[17] The Philadelphia Inquirer noted: "The lights and shades of the two characters portrayed by Nazimova are very well done, and an excellent example of the artistic merit of the popular star."[18] Finally, the New York Times was also impressed by Nazimova's dual personifications. "Madame Nazimova makes both of these characters real, each in its environment. By the strength and subtlety of her acting she makes their meaning clear, putting their feelings into the heart of the spectators."[19] Out of the Fog was another success.

The Red Lantern also offered Nazimova two different roles. She played half-sisters, one oriental

and one white. The film was praised for its elaborate settings, active scenes, and especially for Nazimova's performances. Photoplay Journal reported: "In The Red Lantern we see this justly celebrated star at her very best, in Oriental settings of grandeur and situations of compelling interest."[20] The New York Times especially praised Nazimova for her characterization of the oriental half-sister, Mahlee. "Madame Nazimova's power of vivid impersonation and ability to put meaning into looks and action find full expression. The result is a genuine character."[21] Once again, with the film The Red Lantern, Nazimova had found the critical favor she had not received for her last stage performances.

The third Capellani directed film of 1919 starring Alla Nazimova was Eye for Eye. It gave the film star the role of another untamed child. This time she came from the desert and fell in love with a French naval captain. The New York Times praised her variety and intensity in the drama,[22] while the Philadelphia Inquirer offered the following evaluation of her performance.

> Her work is admirable and her lithe, plastic body and youthful appearance are physical factors which add to the lure of her artistic enactment. Throughout the film she dominates everything by the forcefulness of her portrayal. One feature that will cause added interest is Nazimova's dancing, which is cleverly interwoven with the plot. One dance especially, a dagger number, will be found not only delightful but thrilling as well.[23]

The Brat was the fourth film released in 1919 starring Alla Nazimova. Directed by Herbert Blanche, who would render the same service in her 1920 film Stronger than Death, the picture gave Nazimova the title role of a shabby little chorus girl. The Brat was rescued from her sordid life by a novelist, who, after a sequence of adventures, falls in love with her and marries her so that they can live happily ever after.

When The Brat appeared in movie theatres audiences generally applauded the venture and particularly the work of Nazimova and Charles Bryant, who played the novelist. Unfavorable criticism, however, was beginning to creep into the reviews of Nazimova vehicles. The New York Times complained about the worthlessness of the story. "More than a few persons will undoubtedly regret that those responsible for it spread the melodrama and sentimentality on so thick and labeled the characters so conspicuously."[24]

Four more Nazimova films were released in 1920. In Stronger than Death, her seventh venture with Metro, Nazimova portrayed an exotic dancer in British East India whose adventures proved that love is stronger than death. Once again Nazimova and Metro had produced a film about a bizarre woman in a foreign locale, but most of the critics

were unimpressed. Photoplay observed:

> Ordinarily stories of exotic locales, such as India, are too expensive to be readily salable. But Nazimova's flame-like personality requires vehicles of unusual color and glamour. In this case the story is colorful, dramatic and it affords the star wonderful acting chances; its lack of novelty is of course a great weakness and only partially balanced by the other factors.[25]

The three other silent films Nazimova made in 1920 were directed by Ray C. Smallwood. The roles she portrayed included two more characterizations of young girls in Heart of a Child and Billions. The third movie, Madame Peacock, gave the actress another opportunity to play the bizarre type she had already attempted in Stronger than Death. De Witt Bodeen called these characterizations "too curiously mannered to be real."[26]

While Nazimova was still receiving some good reviews for her portrayals of gamins in movies like Heart of a Child and Billions, critics generally spurned the slender plots of the films and reported that it was only the presence of the actress that made the movies bearable. Heart of a Child yielded the following response from the Philadelphia Inquirer: "Nazimova brings to the part of Sally Snape her usual rare charm and ability, making the elfish slum child human yet fascinatingly eerie and dramatic."[27] The New York Mirror believed that the actress's performance saved the film. "When the theme is running short of tension Nazimova, by sheer

effort and personality lifts it out of the sloughs of inanimate, inane despond."[28] The New York Times, sounding a similar note, praised the director and the "ebullient, magnetic Nazimova,"[29] and concluded, "The fact that it is preposterous will not worry many."[30]

The program for Billions billed Nazimova as "the world's greatest actress,"[31] but once again the film's reviews were only passable. The Philadelphia Inquirer, however, found the leading lady " . . . thoroughly interesting. She romps through the various scenes in bizarre costumes and seems to be having the time of her life."[32] This sentiment was evidently not supported by the actress. In an interview with Lucius Beebe of the New York Herald Tribune given in 1932, the actress reported that she hated all the Heart of a Child and Billions type of stories.

> Kicking up my heels and standing on tiptoe to kiss the big, strong hero-man! Its a mercy neither of those types are in vogue any more. I'd go crazy.[33]

Madame Peacock, released on October 10, 1920, also gave the actress an opportunity to play two roles. One character was a successful actress, the other was a shy, stage-struck girl. Playing the two roles kept the actress "almost continually on the screen."[34] The New York Times reviewer did not like the Nazimova performances nor the film, and he took the opportunity to admonish the actress.

> Whatever Miss Weiman wrote has been used by Madame Nazimova to display her own virtuosity. The picture is all Nazimova, in various moods and manners, from the extremely simple to the exaggeratedly affected and exotic. . . . But Madame Peacock will not, therefore, give anyone an impression of reality. Spectators may enjoy it, because the extravagant Nazimova is frequently enjoyable, but those who know that she can also impersonate a real character must wish that she would do so soon.[35]

Nazimova's final film for Metro was, in many ways, the final step toward failure for the film actress. The film was Camille and it was directed by Ray C. Smallwood. Camille was the first of a sequence of three "highly stylized and somewhat freakish productions"[36] which she created with the help of Charles Bryant, but particularly under the influence of Rudolph Valentino's wife, Natacha Rambova. De Witt Bodeen states the opinion of most critics.

> Especially after she had met and collaborated with Natacha Rambova, she began to be tainted by affectation. For an actress who had pioneered in realism, she was becoming a disciple of the art for art's sake school. She was going against the very creed that had established her--"Be real!"[37]

Camille, which was released in September, 1921, is described in production by Irving Shulman, author of Valentino.

> Although Ray C. Smallwood was the official director of Camille and Natacha Rambova--Nazimova's most talented protegee--merely the set designer, it soon became obvious that Miss Rambova, a narcissistic young woman of glacial beauty and hauteur, was the actual director of the film. Miss Rambova subordinated everything to her sets, and no detail of production was too small to escape her notice and

> criticism. When the picture was completed, the only ones at Metro who liked what they saw were Nazimova, who dominated the film to the exclusion of all others, and Miss Rambova.[38]

Nazimova and Natacha Rambova decided to make their version of Camille contemporary. They justified their decision in the film titles.

> Camille! What a magic conjuring of players who have portrayed Dumas' immortal "Daughter of Chance." And with them comes the thought of basque and crinoline. But why not a Camille of today? Living the same story in this generation.[39]

In addition, the end of the film was changed from the traditional final scene of the play when Camille dies in Armand's arms. "Instead, she disregards all precedents and dies in a huge ornamental bed, with only memories of her early love for Armand coming to her in her delirium."[40]

Camille was not well received by the public nor the critics. The New York Times did not even review it, and, in fact, memories of Nazimova's Camille, even with a young Rudolph Valentino as Armand, are completely overshadowed by the later Garbo version. Bodeen even reports that "fans booed the film."[41]

During 1921 Nazimova was invited by Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks to join the newly formed United Artists which had released the film Camille. According to Shelia Graham, however, the merger did not work out.

> The partnership with Nazimova was brief. Alla believed that an executive of United Artists at that time wanted a cut of her Salome film. She refused his demands and later accused him of underselling the picture.[42]

On January 29, 1921 Nazimova announced that she would finance a repertoire of films beginning with A Doll's House and Salome. Her Metro contract had expired, so she decided that with her own money she would make the kind of films she believed in. By that time she was very aware of the mistakes she had made at Metro. "I must purge myself," she said.[43]

With the selection of Ibsen's A Doll's House for her next film Nazimova returned to the Ibsen classics that had made her famous. The picture, which was not released until February, 1922, was directed by Charles Bryant, who, for once, was not playing the leading male role in a Nazimova film. Bodeen classified this film as one of Nazimova's best cinematic efforts. He reasons, "A Doll's House was at least a valiant and honest effort to bring Ibsen to the screen, and in it are very few of the bad mannerisms Nazimova had allowed herself to acquire."[44] Bodeen's evaluation is reiterated by Deems Taylor in his book A Pictorial History of the Movies. In fact, most critics felt that the movie demonstrated Nazimova's return to the fine film performances that they had previously found so satisfying. Photoplay stated "Madame Bryant is regaining her artistic balance, her

next celluloid should restore her to her first high histrionic standard."[45]

Nazimova's second venture into personal film production was to be her and Natacha Rambova's almost surrealistic version of Aubrey Beardsley's interpretation of Oscar Wilde's Salome. While Photoplay called Salome one of the best pictures of the month of January, 1923, this evaluation was by no means general. In fact, Thomas Craven, in a vitriolic review in the New Republic, declared, "I defy anyone to show a single point of resemblance between the unimaginative stupidity of the Nazimova production and the work of the English artist."[46]

Salome was so unusual that there are various contemporary newspaper reports indicating that Nazimova had trouble getting the film distributed at all. In October, 1922 the New York Herald questioned what had happened to the film. Apparently it had been shown to an invited audience by the National Board of Review in July, 1922 and nothing had been heard of it since.[47] In addition, a Toledo newspaper report indicates that Salome had been turned down by exhibitors because the picture was "too bizarre" and "frank on the physical side."[48] Although the film was finally released by Allied Artists in January, 1923, the money that Nazimova had invested in it was lost. The picture did receive some good critical reports, but it was not appealing to

the general public. "The meager audiences who saw Salome hated it and were openly derisive."[49]

Nazimova's own film productions of A Doll's House and Salome had ruined her financially, but there were still film producers in Hollywood who were willing to star the actress in films of their choice. Actually, three more Nazimova pictures were released in 1924 and 1925. Two films were released by First National, while the third was released by Vitagraph.

The first film was Madonna of the Streets, which was directed by Edwin Carewe and released on November 9, 1924. The New York Times criticized the presentation about cockney London, remarking that "nobody who knows anything about London's Chinatown would recognize it in this film."[50] Although the newspaper critic was not very partial to the picture itself, he did have a few kind words for the star.

> In most of the sequences Nazimova looks quite well. She indulges in too much make-up, and therefore the long close-ups are not in her favor, but her acting is natural and effective.[51]

J. Stuart Blackton was the next director to make a film with Nazimova. His film, entitled The Redeeming Sin, told of a poor Apache girl who fell in love with a rich sculptor, and eventually had to try to convince him to return the bejewelled madonna he had stolen from a church. Mordaunt Hall of the New York Times felt that Nazimova's performance was better than her work in

Madonna of the Streets. He remarked, "Although at times she is a little too quick in her movements, again she shows her knowledge of pantomimics."[52]

Nazimova's final silent film was entitled My Son, and Bodeen reports that her performance in the film was "very real and moving."[53] The film, which was also directed by Edwin Carewe, gave Nazimova the opportunity to play the role of a Portuguese mother who saved her son from a "baby vamp;"[54] it was just about the only mature role that Nazimova ever played in silent films, even though she was forty-six when her ten year stint in Hollywood ended.

Alla Nazimova returned to Hollywood and graced five films during the last few years of her life. In 1940, at the age of sixty-one, the actress appeared in her first sound film. She found the experience revealing.

> The movie actor today is fortunate. Acting on the screen has improved because the actor has nothing to do but think of his performance. There are wardrobe girls, make-up people and hairdressers to see that you are ready to play the scene at the exact moment it is scheduled. In 1920 we had none of these helpful associates. We tried to do too much. Like myself, most of us were writing, directing, and even cutting pictures as well as acting before the camera.[55]

Mervyn Le Roy directed Nazimova in her first sound film, Escape. An American man, played by Robert Taylor, returned to pre-World War II Germany to try to find his mother, played by Nazimova, who had disappeared when she went back to her homeland to try to sell her

house. Although, according to Shelia Graham, Nazimova was almost cut out of Escape,[56] the few brief scenes she appeared in brought critical acclaim, even though the films' stars, Robert Taylor and Norma Shearer, were not accounted very convincing. Bosley Crowther wrote: "Alla Nazimova, in her few scenes as the mother, wrings one's heart with her sincerity."[57] Another critic, David Robinson, who saw the film in the late 1950s also enthused over the Nazimova performance.

> In Escape one glimpses something of what she must have been--a Garbo, fired with inspiration. The film is a piece of post-Casablanca kitsch, directed by Mervyn Le Roy, about the rescue of a Jewish prisoner from a concentration camp. Nazimova makes of the prisoner (an old actress) something rich and extraordinary; a wretched, tormented woman, illuminated with the remembrance of her own brilliance and success and charm.[58]

Rouben Mamoulian was the second director to cast Nazimova in a film in the 1940s. Moving from playing Robert Taylor's mother to enacting the mother of Tyrone Power, this time the actress appeared in a remake of Blood and Sand. Nazimova's small role was not mentioned in the New York Times review, albeit R. W. Dana of the Herald Tribune remarked, "Nazimova gives one of the film's best performances as the mother who has lost a husband to a bull and knows she will lose a son. She and Cregar are the realist figures."[59] Actually the Twentieth Century Fox movie is considered important primarily because of its fine color photography.

Nazimova's last three films were all released in 1944. In Our Time featured Nazimova as Paul Henreid's aristocratic Polish mother. Directed by Vincent Sherman, the film attempted to demonstrate the contrast between the old and new life styles in pre-World War II Poland. The movie received rather unfavorable reviews, whereas Nazimova's portrayal of the elderly noblewoman was praised by most critics. Bosley Crowther compared her work in the film with previous stage performances. The critic made the following comparison: "Nazimova plays a fine patrician mother in her very best Cherry Orchard style."[60] Another reviewer praised the actress's "extraordinary vitality."[61]

A second film adaptation of Thornton Wilder's The Bridge of San Luis Rey was Nazimova's fourth effort for the sound screen. The film was directed by Rowland V. Lee and featured Francis Lederer, Louis Calhern and Blanche Yurka as well as Nazimova in the role of the Marquesa de MontMayor, who was killed when the bridge collapsed. Bodeen reported: "Nazimova was the only player who seemed to know what it was all about, and was always in scene."[62]

Alla Nazimova's final appearance on stage or screen came in David O. Selznick's three hour film Since You Went Away, which explored life on the home front during World War II. In the final reel of the long film

Nazimova appears as a Polish-American welder whom Claudette Colbert meets while working in a factory. The highlight of Nazimova's performance in the film is her moving recital of the pledge written on the Statue of Liberty.

Joe Franklin, in Classics of the Silent Screen, states his regret that Nazimova returned to the screen in the 1940s in character roles.[63] Critical response to her performances, however, indicates that most film and theatre reviewers found Nazimova's performances in sound films eminently worthwhile as a finish to a fine career in the performing arts.

The film and vaudeville productions selected for detailed study in this chapter demonstrate the different facets of Nazimova's work during this phase of her career. Two vaudeville productions will be discussed in detail. War Brides, which was the first effective drama the actress appeared in in several years, was also important because it introduced the actress to her film career. The Unknown Lady is described because it gave Nazimova a place in vaudeville history, even though the play itself was not judged worthwhile.

The films described in this chapter represent the different types of films that Nazimova made during her career in silent film. War Brides, her first film, will be discussed again because the strong anti-war

vehicle demonstrated Nazimova's ability to communicate effectively through pantomime, making a film career feasible. The Red Lantern will also be covered. It was an early Metro production and in it Nazimova did some of her best work for the silent screen as an "exotic woman." The popular film was important because it helped further the "exotic" image already established with the public in plays like Bella Donna. The two final films particularized were both produced by the actress herself. A Doll's House, although not a financial success, was considered a worthy demonstration of the actress's ability to handle Ibsen on film. Salome, in contrast, was accounted by most critics a vivid illustration of the mannered performer Nazimova was considered to have become by the end of her film career. The film is so unusual that today it is sometimes called "camp." After the failure of her film career Nazimova returned to the vaudeville stage, but she did not achieve the success she had with War Brides.

Vaudeville

Vaudeville played a minor role in Nazimova's career with one important exception. War Brides, which she performed on the vaudeville stages of America in 1914 and 1915, was significant, not only because it introduced the actress to her film career, but also

because the short, effective playlet gave Nazimova her first opportunity in several years to play a strong woman involved in a difficult situation, the kind of character she would perform most effectively both on stage and in films. In a letter to her friend Fola Middleton the actress herself expressed pleasure at performing in War Brides.

> Not that I have anything to say--just because I must let you know how superhumanly happy I am. I breathe again. I have a right to look myself into my own eyes and not blush. I am doing honest work that gives me a reason to be on the stage, work that makes me better. . . . I feel that you know all about me and are happy with me now.[64]

Nazimova appeared in War Brides at the Palace shortly after her lengthy tour as the wicked Mrs. Chepstow in the melodramatic Bella Donna. Undoubtedly the short, thought-provoking drama was an ideal vehicle for the talents of a dramatic actress like Nazimova.

War Brides told the story of a peasant girl, Joan, in a mythical Germanic kingdom. Nazimova portrayed the peasant girl heroine who worked in a factory and questioned the suffering of her fellow workers. After Joan led a successful strike against the factory management, the mythical kingdom declared war on its neighboring countries. Joan's husband went off to the war where both he and his brothers were killed in battle. The kingdom lost so many men that the king declared that all unmarried women must marry so that they could produce sons and

eventually build up the army again. Joan objected and organized the women to protest against the war and the marriage policy. Finally she organized an anti-war demonstration before the king. The outraged king declared that there would always be war, and the pregnant Joan shouted, "No more children for war!" Then she shot herself. "In a moving climax her body is borne aloft by the women who vow there will be no children until men outlaw war forever."[65]

War Brides was featured on the vaudeville stage in 1915, before America entered World War I. Its anti-war sentiments created a large audience for the Palace. "Comedy acts feared to follow this one (she was much tougher to follow than Bernhardt); the best comedy acts worked at least ten minutes before the audience dried their eyes."[66]

Although vaudeville audiences appeared to enjoy the short, exciting drama, critical response was not totally favorable. Exceptive criticism came from the New York Times[67] and, years later, from Djuna Barnes, writing for Theatre Guild Magazine. She stated: "The devil took her by the heels and slung her into the Palace with War Brides,"[68] although presumably Miss Barnes objected to the play because it led Nazimova into her ill-fated film career.

Praise for War Brides came from Louis De Foe, writing for Green Book Magazine in 1915.

> I am convinced that the determined rebellious Joan in War Brides, which she acts at white heat, yet with just the emotional intensity that the role demands, is the finest exhibition of her peculiar powers she has given since . . . Lia in The Chosen People.69

De Foe's sentiment tended to prevail at the time, probably reinforced by the fact that it had been at least five years since theatre goers had viewed Nazimova in an effective, serious drama.

War Brides was a tremendous success on the Orpheum circuit and around the country. Originally Nazimova had signed for a two-week engagement at the Palace, but she had to extend it to three. Newspaper reports indicate that, with the single exception of a Sarah Bernhardt opus, it was the first time a dramatic attraction had been retained for more than one week at the Palace. Even if War Brides had not led to a film career, it could still be counted a popular success for Nazimova, and a return to the type of role which suited her performing style.

The Unknown Lady, Nazimova's second stint on the vaudeville circuits, turned out to be so memorable that records of the event are included in most of the chronicles written about the history of this unique art form. The singular tale involved the czar of vaudeville, Edward Albee. Nazimova had been performing in The Unknown

Lady, a short play by George Middleton, on the vaudeville circuit in San Francisco, Denver and Los Angeles. The author reported that the play was "such a 'smash hit' on the Orpheum 'time' that Albee sought it for the Eastern Keith circuit to begin at the New York Palace."[70]

October 29, 1923 was an historic date for Albee, who always insisted upon "purity"[71] at his foremost vaudeville theatre, the Palace.

> In the sketch Nazimova portrayed a fallen angel hired by a rich man to supply false evidence in his wife's divorce action. A fairly obvious piece of propoganda against New York's hypocritical divorce laws.[72]

In the audience on that eventful day was a young priest, Father John B. Kelley, Chaplain of the Catholic Writer's Guild. In her book, The Palace, Marian Spitzer reported what happened after the priest saw The Unknown Lady.

> Incensed at the Nazimova sketch the young priest dashed up to Mr. Albee's sanctum on the sixth floor and made known his outrage. Mr. Albee was shocked at his revelation. It seems that somehow or other, despite the long cross-country trek, Mr. Albee had never been informed of the contents of the Middleton play.[73]

Albee immediately cancelled the sketch, but an even greater shock came later. Douglas Gilbert, in American Vaudeville, states that Albee had all his players sign a contract with an elimination clause so that, if necessary, he could censor their productions. Nazimova had crossed out the clause when she signed her contract and substituted a clause stating that nothing could be

changed in her material. The contract had been accepted and filed in Albee's office without the change being noticed so, although Albee cancelled the sketch, he was forced to pay Nazimova her $11,000 salary for the entire period of the contract.[74]

George Middleton, the author of The Unknown Lady, told the New York Times he could not understand why the management had not known the thesis of his play. He told the reporter, "If they did not know of the nature of the play, I cannot understand why they advertised Madame Nazimova's role as 'sensational' and called the play 'dramatic dynamite.'"[75] Whether or not Albee's office was at fault, Nazimova made vaudeville history because she was paid even though she didn't work.

Although The Unknown Lady had created a sensation in the vaudeville world, the New York Times reviewer, who had managed to see one of the two performances given at the Palace, called the drama "not too inspired,"[76] and revealed that "the ample opportunity for chest thumping and crescendo getting was fully exploited by Madame Nazimova."[77] New Yorkers who wanted to see the sensational drama, but had missed the opening performances at the Palace, did get an opportunity. The short play was added to the performances of the Grand Guignol Players on November 5, 1923.

Alla Nazimova only appeared in five vaudeville productions during her career. While none of the playlets could be classified excellent dramas, they kept the actress in the public eye at two stages in her career when it was difficult for her to find work on the legitimate stage. Surprisingly, through her contract with Albee, she managed to make vaudeville history. Reknowned in theatre and film because of her many performances, Nazimova is reknowned in vaudeville because she did not perform.

Film

Bodeen reports that Nazimova had been interested in making motion pictures for several years before she agreed to appear in War Brides. In fact, she had been interested "for five years ever since I saw the process in operation."[78] Nazimova had been offered roles in several other films, but had always requested an opportunity to see the film-maker's work before she would consent to appear in their films. "I was interested, you understand, but I could not find a man who possessed the imaginative faculty that I wanted."[79] None of the films she saw had impressed her. She changed her mind when Herbert Brenon invited her to see his film A Daughter of the Gods. The artist observed, "I saw it at a private view, and was enchanted. It is a work of pure creative

imagination. By his work . . . I was satisfied that this was a director with whom I could work."[80]

War Brides, therefore, was produced by Selznick and directed by Herbert Brenon, whom Lewis Jacobs described as one of the several directors of the 1914-18 period who could be called "competent craftsmen of their day, esteemed by the trade, who occasionally made an outstandingly successful picture."[81] Brenon's outstandingly successful picture was War Brides, which was made in New York.[82]

Upon the release of War Brides in November, 1916 the film proved to be an instant success. The New York Times film critic reported that Alla Nazimova had successfully adapted to the new art form.

> Madame Nazimova justified the great interest thus manifested by showing that she had adapted her talents to the new medium with unusual success. In the language of the studio, she screens well, which, translated, means that she is a good subject for motion photography, always a consummation devoutly to be wished for; and what is more to her credit, since it is the result of her intelligence and not her good fortune, she knows how to express herself in terms of the film. Her marvelously mobile face, capable of indicating varying shades of emotion, especially those of sorrow, is a priceless asset for the dumb show of the screen.[83]

The Times critic concluded his favorable review by comparing Nazimova's screen work with her stage work. "She seemed less able to resist the temptation to indulge in the contortions that have marred her acting in recent years;" the critic felt, however, that the problem only

existed in the first half of the film. In the last half of the film Nazimova's work was described as "excellent."[84]

Through Nazimova's influence War Brides made one important contribution to film history. It introduced a young Richard Barthelmess to the medium which was to make him famous. Barthelmess's mother had taught Nazimova English; and it is reported that the actress got him the job because of her continuing friendship with his mother, Caroline Harris. Throughout her career "Nazimova was always ready to help the people she liked."[85] War Brides also featured Nazimova's "husband" Charles Bryant, who would continue to work with the actress throughout her film career.

Nazimova achieved critical and popular success with her screen version of War Brides. Undoubtedly the coup d'état encouraged her to continue working in the new entertainment field which she had been hesitant to enter. A whole new world had been opened up to the actress.

The Red Lantern.--This is a fine example of a good Nazimova performance on the silent screen. It was the fourth film she made for Metro and the second film directed by Albert Capellani. In fact, the three films Nazimova made with Capellani were rated above most of her other screen work. All three pictures were enhanced

by the sensitive screen adaptations of June Mathis, as well as by Capellani's early penchant for naturalism in film. Kevin Brownlow reported: "Capellani will not tolerate the exaggeration of facial expression and gesture that was thought essential to motion-picture acting in the earlier days and still is one of the great faults of so many screen players."[86] In view of criticism of Nazimova's posturing and posing in her later films, it is probably regrettable that she only made three films with Capellani.

The frequently praised Red Lantern was a dramatic film about the Boxer uprising in China. Nazimova portrayed two half sisters, Mahlee, the daughter of a white father and a Chinese mother, and Blanche Sackville, the all-white daughter of the same father. The film primarily concerned the Eurasian girl who turned from her Chinese countrymen to the white family who also had a claim on her life. Mahlee fell in love with a young American, but when prejudice barred their marriage she returned to the Chinese people and inspired them to participate in the Boxer Rebellion which took place in Peking in 1900. The film ended when Mahlee "after final failure to obtain recognition from her father . . . dies on the throne from which she had inspired the Boxers as their goddess."[87]

The role of the Eurasian Mahlee was only one of

the two roles Nazimova enacted in The Red Lantern, but it reinforced the image she had established as an "exotic" performer, and only served to enhance the bizarre reputation which had been established with the play Bella Donna. In the picture the other role Nazimova played was minor. Photoplay Journal, however, praised the actress's "sharp and remarkable differentiation,"[88] between the two characters; while the New York Times remarked that the "slight similarity of the characters serves only to suggest that they are sisters."[89] Certainly in The Red Lantern, as in the other three movies in which the actress essayed two roles, Nazimova received only praise for her dual effort.

The film The Red Lantern was one of the really spectacular films of its time. Newspaper articles indicate that $250,000 was spent on the picture and that Nazimova's robes were valued at $50,000. Reportedly over 800 Chinese men, women and children were employed in the crowd scenes. Besides all that, the filmgoer saw the burning of the Allied Nations and the elaborate and exciting fighting between the Allies and the Boxers. Sam Wang, the villain of the piece, was portrayed by Noah Beery. He was often singled out for acclaim, as was Nazimova. The evident success of the feature is exemplified by the following newspaper review. "Every incident, every costume, every racial habit of prejudice

depicted in the picture has the absolute stamp of historical and enthological authenticity."[90]

Nazimova was frequently praised for the final moment in the film when she lay dying on the throne from which she had inspired the Boxer rebellion. The title card which followed read, "East is East and West is West." According to Herb Sterne, the moment "remains one of the most poignant moments in the history of the cinema."[91] His opinion was echoed by Alexander Kirkland in his article, "The Woman from Yalta."[92] Motion Picture News also praised Nazimova's work in the film and concluded, "Her performance is superb in its vividness, poignancy, and sympathy."[93]

Nazimova and The Red Lantern were a good combination. Edward Wagenknecht remarked that "she was well suited in such films as The Red Lantern and Out of the Fog,"[94] although the film historian recoiled from most of the rest of her pictures. In a few early films Nazimova was praised for her work and she undoubtedly deserved the praise. Although she was not bringing audiences dramas of the quality of the Ibsen plays which had brought her to stardom, "knowing the candystick tastes of the average film audience, she gave them the ultimate in sweet exoticism."[95]

A Doll's House.-- Nazimova's first effort as a silent film producer was a version of Ibsen's classic drama of women's

liberation, A Doll's House. It was released by United Artists on February 19, 1922. This was the first of the two films Nazimova produced with her own money. Since Nazimova's film contract with Metro had forbidden the production of Ibsen, the film was also the first effort to bring a film version of one of her great performances to the general public. The film was a critical success and proved that, although under Metro she starred in a bewildering variety of roles from siren to hoyden, the actress was at her best interpreting the pathological characters of European playwrights.

When A Doll's House was released the plaudits came immediately. Photoplay named the film one of the six best of the month when it was released and, along with most other critics, noted that in the film Nazimova seemed to have turned away from the disturbing mannerisms she had been developing in films like Madame Peacock and Stronger than Death. The magazine critic reported, "As Nora, one of the drama's most absorbing women, [she] really acts."[96] The New York Times film critic was particularly pleased with Nazimova's performance in the final scenes of the film and commented, "Here she rings true. She brings the underlying Nora convincingly to the surface."[97] This was fine praise, although it should be stated that the critic had found the actress "too self-consciously kittenish" in the earlier scenes

of the dramatic film. He continued, "Even Torvald Helmer, surely, would have been irritated by such a jumping jack of a wife as Madame Nazimova's Nora sometimes is."[98]

In summary, albeit there was some criticism of Nazimova's film interpretation of Nora, the overwhelming focus of the critical response was totally different from the poor notices given to the actress's previous interpretation of Camille. "A Doll's House was at least a valiant and honest effort to bring Ibsen to the screen."[99]

The screenplay for A Doll's House had been written by Nazimova herself under the pseudonym Peter M. Winter. The film was directed by Charles Bryant and featured Alan Hale as Helmer and Nigel de Brulier as Dr. Rank. Novel touches included scenes from the early married life of the Helmers and much of the off-stage action which is indicated in the Ibsen play. The New York Times reported that the film used the original ending of the controversial play,[100] although the writer commented, "There is, perhaps, a stronger suggestion of the ultimate reunion of Helmer and his wife in the photoplay than in the original play, but it is only suggested."[101] The same critic concluded:

> It may be said that the picture does not do violence to the play, and for this, as well as for the general intelligence and sincerity with which they have done their work, those responsible for the photoplay are to be congratulated.[102]

A Doll's House was a success artistically, but not financially. The critical success encouraged Nazimova to continue producing films. Her next film Salome proved to be both an artistic and financial failure.

Salome.--Alla Nazimova's version of Beardsley's interpretation of Oscar Wilde's Salome was released on January 7, 1923. The actress had financed the film herself, had encouraged Natacha Rambova to design the elaborate costumes and sets, had played the leading role, had written the script under the pseudonym Peter M. Winter, and probably had directed it herself, although the titles credit Charles Bryant. Bodeen suggests that "there was little doubt among those who knew the facts that Nazimova was committing professional suicide."[103]

Salome received some poor reviews when it was released, but the major problem was that the small audiences who did attend the film openly jeered and presumably told their friends to stay away. The lack of patrons eventually led Nazimova to lose all the money she had invested in the opus. The actress made three more films after Salome, but it was Salome that finally made her fans forsake her.

Today Salome, as interpreted by Nazimova, is considered either "one of the great examples of high camp,"[104] or expressionistic. It has been described as "an early bold experiment in stylization."[105] Critics

have written frequently about the film but they rarely agree. In fact, there is a surprising disparity of opinion about the artistic value of the work. In January, 1923, the New York Times called the film "an unusual and at the same time, a visually satisfying spectacle," but the critic also decried the handling of the story, which he found disappointing.[106] Kenneth MacGowan in Behind the Scenes called the film "absurdly mannered,"[107] while Edward Wagenknecht in The Movies in the Age of Innocence called the film one of the two best examples of the studio film in America.[108] Alice Brady, writing for The Drama in 1923 declared:

> To me Salome, by Madame Nazimova, is the ideal construction for a picture. It comprises only the incidents of an hour, maybe two, and each situation is given its full value. One gets not only the actual notes but also the overtones.[109]

In direct opposition to Miss Brady was Thomas Craven of the New Republic, also writing shortly after the picture had been released in 1923. After a detailed evaluation of Salome as an example of the film as an art form he concludes:

> Nazimova's Salome is not more unintelligent than most films--it is only more pretentious in its claims. So long as the debasement of literary and artistic ideas continue to fill the theatres, just so long will the moving picture remain at its low and insufferable stage of vulgarity.[110]

In order to understand the disparities in critical response to Nazimova's Salome several facets of the film will be closely elucidated. Descriptions will be

presented of Nazimova's screenplay, Natacha Rambova's visual interpretation of the Beardsley drawings, and finally Nazimova's interpretation of the characters, and particularly her performance in the leading role of Salome.

The screenplay which Nazimova devised for her film closely follows the poetic Oscar Wilde drama. The film opens in Herod's banquet hall where we see Herod lusting after his young stepdaughter. The camera follows the young Salome as she leaves the hall in order to escape Herod's eyes. Once outside she hears the cries of the Jewish prophet Jokannan, who is imprisoned in a cistern. At Salome's request the prophet is brought before her. Although he insults her mother she wants to kiss him, but he refuses even to look at her. In the banquet hall Herod realizes that Salome is missing and he sends a messenger to fetch her. She finally agrees to return. When she returns Herod asks Salome to dance, but she refuses until he agrees to give her half his kingdom or anything else she wants. She dances. After the dance Salome asks for a reward of a silver charger with Jokannan's head upon it. Herod resists, but finally is forced to comply. When the head is brought in Salome says, "Now I can kiss thy mouth, Jokannan," and does so. Herod believes that something terrible will happen to him because he has had the prophet killed, so he orders

Salome's death. The last shot in the film is of Salome's face as the soldiers advance upon her with their pikes.

Critics of the screenplay felt that Nazimova had failed to capture Wilde's intent. Thomas Craven reported:

> I grant that without words most of the power is incommunicable, but with the aid of Beardsley's linear art and with appropriate characterization the general atmospheric tone of the Wilde version might have been maintained. In the picture all is lost--the fantastic precision of the imagery, the tragic sensuality and the religious terror. The scenes are not elaborate; they are barren, inarticulate and meaningless.[111]

Natacha Rambova's visual interpretation of Salome was based on the Aubrey Beardsley designs. Both costumes and sets were very simple and designed primarily in black and white with silver and gold trim to vary the color value. At one point in the original film the whole screen was tinted rose, then red. Bosley Crowther, in 1967, had an opportunity to view the original Beardsley drawings and the film and then compare them. He remarked:

> The flimsy garment and the bubbly headdress that Nazimova wears as the haughty stepdaughter of Herod . . . does have some passing resemblance to the airy things the Beardsley ladies wear, and the gaudy Arabian Nights scenery and the outfits of the flunkies do look a bit like some of the designs in the drawings.[112]

Edward Wagenknecht, too, remembered that pearl headdress, which he called "a headdress of glass bubbles."[113] In the original New York Times review it had been called "a headdress of bouncing white balls."[114]

Even ignoring the response to that irritating headdress, which was not the only headgear that Nazimova wore in the film, the critics were not overwhelmingly enthusiastic about Natacha Rambova's costume and set designs. One critic remarked, "Most of those who accept the fanciful treatment of the production as a whole probably will not be disturbed by any particular feature of it."[115] The New York Times praise for the visual side of the film was reiterated by John Farrar in an article he wrote about costuming in the movies. Farrar singled out Salome as an example of effective work.

> In only a few cases have they learned that stark simplicity gives as artistic an effect as elaboration of detail. If you remember the Nazimova production of Salome, you will recall the amazingly effective and yet exceedingly simple costumes.[116]

The most frequently criticized aspect of Salome was Nazimova's decision to characterize the lead role as a twelve year old girl. The actress explained her reasoning to Lee Frank:

> She was usually played as a vamp. I did not believe she was like that. According to history she was a child of twelve. I tried to play her as a sophisticated kid.[117]

The New York Times critic and many of his cohorts would have been willing to accept that interpretation if the purport of the drama had not been changed by the youthful interpretation of Salome. "Madame Nazimova's representation of Salome as young and innocent and yearning may even be accepted by those willing to get altogether

away from logic and reality,"[118] he stated, but he was unable to accept a twelve year old child doing a seductive dance with seven veils, another frequently criticized part of the film.

The undoubtedly rather tame dance was given full coverage by the New York Times critic, who believed it ruined the climax of the film, even though it was acceptable to the censors.

> Can an approved Salome be interesting, can she be a genuinely dramatic figure? Take the dance, for instance. This is the climax of the drama. The way is prepared for it by words and action that unmistakably indicate its character. The spectators know what to expect as well as Herod himself. And when it comes it has the approval of the censors! The moral monitors of New York permit the dance that Herod thinks is worth half a kingdom! Can you imagine it? You cannot. Nor do you see the dance. You see an exceedingly tame and not remarkably graceful performance that Herod wouldn't have given standing room for. Yet on the faces of Herod and the other onlookers you see expressions intended to indicate that such a dance as you have been led to imagine is being performed. It shows you part of it and in what you see there is nothing to account for the gross eagerness in the faces of the men. So the whole scene collapses--and it is supposed to be the high climax of the story.[119]

Thomas Craven caustically described the same moment in the film.

> She flits hither and thither with the mincing step of a toe-dancer; she has the figure of a boy, and in her absurd costume, a satin bathing suit of recent pattern, she impresses one as the old Tetrarch's cup-bearer. Try as she will she cannot be seductive--the physical handicap is unsurmountable; she tosses her head impudently, grimaces repeatedly and rolls her eyes with a vitreous stare. The effect is comic. . . . The Dance of the Seven Veils, used by the poet to release the hideous consequences of lust, is wholly innocuous.[120]

Nazimova's interpretation of the other characters of the drama was not favorably received. Although, "to be true to the spirit of the original, she reportedly insisted that every actor be a homosexual,"[121] this evidently did not improve the characterizations. Craven quickly dismissed them.

> Herodias is a drunken charwoman with frizzy hair; Herod resembles nothing so much as a fat clown; John the Baptist is ascetic and canonically lean, but his leprous dibility is not likely to inspire the salacious Princess of Judea with any ideas, either impure or holy.[122]

While other critics did not go to the trouble to describe them, their negative reviews made it evident that they, too, found the characterizations that Nazimova had conceived for Salome were too outrageous to be acceptable.

Nazimova, in an interview with C. H. Bonte, defended her attempt to bring art to the screen in Salome. She theorized that film producers were unwilling to experiment with originality because of their low estimation of the mentality of the film-going public. Here is part of Nazimova's argument.

> Art is the ability to communicate thought and emotion; and if Salome is not as interesting to the public as it is to me, then it is because somewhere in the production there is a flaw in art. I am sure that if the story, as seen on the screen, truly reveals itself, it will be liked. I am not afraid that the people will not understand it. If people see the character of Salome as I do, her environment, the glamour of the court of Herod and its emotional grossness, the spell of the spiritual appeal of St. John the Baptist--as I see them--I have no fear.[123]

Unfortunately neither the critics nor the public saw the film as Nazimova saw it. They were unwilling to accept Nazimova's characterization of Salome as "a petulant little princess with a Freudian complex,"[124] her adaptation of the drama to a screenplay, her tame version of the dance, or even her interpretations of the other characters in the drama. Although the visual side of Salome was occasionally acclaimed, it also received a share of negative criticism. Deems Taylor noted that "widely discussed, it was not widely attended."[125] The lack of box office revenue ended Nazimova's career as a film producer.

Nazimova's Film Roles

Film was the primary focus of Nazimova's life between 1915 and 1925, and it occupied her again between 1940 and 1945. Even though most critics do not consider films the best medium to observe her talents as an actress, Nazimova probably achieved greater fame among the general public of the United States during the four years when she was Metro's star performer than at any other time in her long career in the performing arts. Film stardom can make a performer a household word, and for Nazimova that status was achieved primarily between 1918 and 1922. Her fame was such that in 1946 Raymond Chandler, creator of the Los Angeles based private eye, Philip Marlowe, could use her name as a noun. He could

call "a long, lean, hungry brunette, with rouged cheek-bones, thick black hair parted in the middle,"[126] a long cigarette holder, and a European accent, a Nazimova, and expect at least most of his readers to understand the reference.

Nazimova herself never liked the silent pictures she made. In fact, in article after article in her later years the actress reiterated her distaste for her films. Here are two of her outbursts.

> "I hated my pictures. In those days we had to over-act to make up for the lack of words. It was awful. And the make-up and the photography! And my hair! It looked as if I'd gone wild!"[127]

The second example of this dislike of her film work occurs in the article "I Come Full Circle," which the actress wrote for Theatre Magazine in 1928. Nazimova described meeting old friends from the Moscow Art Theatre when they came to America to perform in 1923. She had thought they would have forgotten all about her, but instead they told her,

> "We saw everything you did in the movies." They were enthusiastic about my moving pictures! But I would like to burn every inch of those films, destroy them, I am ashamed of them.[128]

In several interviews Nazimova blamed her poor films on the roles she was assigned to play.

> They wouldn't let me grow up in pictures. I was 43 when I made my last film, but they still wanted me to play young hoydens. But I insisted on being a mother in Madame Peacock. They compromised and

> let me play the mother if I also played the daughter--the picture flopped.[129]

While it is true that Nazimova attempted many roles in her film career that were not suited to her talents as an essentially dramatic actress, since she had a contract with Metro that allowed her to select her own material, most of the blame for her failures should probably fall on the actress herself. She did not pick the right vehicles.

Under the Metro contract Nazimova frequently selected stories about young girls, although she was forty-six when her film career started and forty-six when it ended. Edward Wagenknecht noted that "trying to be Sarah Bernhardt did not satisfy her; she had to be Mary Pickford and Mabel Normand, too."[130] Most film critics feel that Nazimova's silent screen career was considerably injured by her evident determination to be another Mary Pickford in some of her films.

> On the stage, flatteringly lighted in a rose-amber spot, she could have still played the ingenue effectively, because her body was, as always, slight and remarkably graceful; on the screen she looked what she was--a middle-aged woman miscast in youthful roles she should never have attempted. She was not only mannered in them; she was kittenish, full of tricks which betrayed unattractive fits of the 'cutes.'[131]

Curiously, Nazimova's awareness of the error she made in selecting girlish roles seems apparent in this quotation from Wagenknecht.

> There can be no question about Nazimova's ability, but she herself put the finger on the weakness that finally destroyed her when she told an interviewer that her devilish ambition "makes the most unsuitable role the part I love best."[132]

The other type of woman that Nazimova often portrayed in silent films was diametrically opposed to her young girl roles. She is frequently classified as one of the first of the screen's bizarre performers in the tradition of Pola Negri. Unfortunately, however, the fine work that she did in this genre in films like The Red Lantern was quickly forgotten by the audiences who jeered the elaborate unreal mannerisms she developed in later films like Madame Peacock, Camille and Salome.

De Witt Bodeen stated that Nazimova "loved the tour de force challenge the camera permitted her;"[133] actually she elected several different types of roles during her screen career, even though she concentrated on young girls and bizarre women. Young girls were the heroines in Revelation, Toys of Fate, Out of the Fog, Eye for Eye, The Brat, Heart of a Child, Billions, Madonna of the Streets and The Redeeming Sin; albeit they varied from gypsies to Apaches to madonnas. Bizarre women were featured in The Red Lantern, Stronger than Death, Madame Peacock, Camille and Salome, although Salome might be classified as a bizarre young girl. Nazimova portrayed essentially dramatic roles in War Brides and A Doll's House and mothers in Out of the Fog,

Madame Peacock, and My Son, although in the first two movies in which she played mother roles, she also played the heroine.

Alexander Kirkland suggests that the variety of roles Nazimova played may have confused her audience. He points out that movie audiences of the day liked to know what to expect from their stars.

> Though she was as great a favorite as Gable or Garbo were to become later, a star of the silent screen seemed a symbol rather than a living being. The Russian actress's chameleon variations, from Oriental siren to adolescent girl, made her even more illusory than the rest. This versatility first tantalized, but finally frustrated her fans, as surely as if Mary Pickford had continually changed her hairdo.[134]

Blame for the failure of her film career, in the eyes of most critics, contemporary or current, rest with the actress herself. In 1921 Photoplay Journal published the following article, "An Open Letter to Nazimova." The writer asks how such a great actress could disappoint her audiences and make such bad pictures.

> It is not because you have not had opportunity. With Metro you had the choice of everything. You have been favored in every way, to the exclusion of everything and everyone else. You had all the money for yourself and for productions you could ask. You have demanded and received probably the largest salary ever paid a star by any company.
>
> You have insisted on selecting, casting, practically directing, cutting and titling your own pictures.

> In the opinion of many who have worked with you, you have tried to do too much. Either you have feared to trust anyone else, or you have decided that you are more efficient in every line than anyone else. Or both.
>
> Perhaps you have come, unfortunately, to that place where you believe the whispering chorus that says "The Queen can do no wrong." Perhaps you forget all the props that held you up in "Nora." Perhaps you think the public will be satisfied if they have enough of Nazimova, no matter in what, no matter how she acts. Perhaps you have decided that at your worst you are better than most actresses.
>
> But you are wrong! We judge Nazimova not by the standard of the screen but by the standard of--Nazimova. Less than your best is no more acceptable than a bad copy of a great masterpiece. It is not fair to offer to the public pictures bearing the name "Nazimova" that possess nothing that name stands for.[135]

In 1972 De Witt Bodeen wrote:

> Her directors were always capable, sometimes remarkably gifted; her writers were more than competent; the entire production value of all her pictures was high; but the stories she chose to film were so bizarre as to be weird and unbelievable, or they were juvenile enough to be more suitable for Mary Pickford. Only her illuminating presence gave her films any value.[136]

Although Nazimova's eventual failure as a screen star may be partially blamed on the actress herself, she did express a clear understanding of the way to work with the new medium of the silent film. In her comments she emphasized the necessity for naturalness, simplicity and sincerity.

> On the stage elocution, personality and the footlight accessories may cover up or mitigate an artificial part. But on the screen you've got to be entirely natural, simple and sincere, or you fail.[137]

> It should be simple--the story. It should tell itself, appeal to the people directly, because it should be powerful, though simple--no period costumes, no interpolations in the way of written explanation.[138]

> "They [pictures] must be treated with sincerity, the same as every other art. See, I can express sadness," she contorted her vivid face; "or anger," she scowled; "but if I do not feel it," she struck her chest, "in here, there is nothing but acting. One must live the part to make the picture audience feel it."[139]

Nazimova also demonstrated her awareness of at least three of the problems that may have led to some of her mannered impersonations in her later films. First she mentioned artificiality.

> There is only one trouble with the movies, and that is the falsity of the stories. One cannot live a story unless it is true to life, to character, to experience, and so long as the stories are false, the actor cannot be blamed for acting the part rather than living it.[140]

Second, she described her overwhelming desire for variety in her films.

> This element of spontanaeity in pictures is for me their principal charm. I find them an everlasting source of stimulating pleasure; but ever I am in pursuit of that something new, that something different, which is the most dominant characteristic of my artistic aims. Part of this may be attributed to my own temperamental peculiarity, and the rest to the fact that my audiences seem like one great composite person to me. Somehow I always feel it is as necessary to offer them something new and different from that which I have done before, as a young girl would feel it necessary to appear before her suitor in a new and different attire.[141]

Thirdly, Nazimova noted that working in film provided no opportunity to try a scene again tomorrow.

> When a scene was played it was played for all time; as it was played there, it would be played all over the world; that I must be my best, as I could not go from one part of the world to the other explaining that I did not feel quite fit in one scene, but it would be better the next day.[142]

She added to this statement. "You might have given your best in the first take, but the lights were wrong. Emotions do not work up for the fourth or fifth take--tears do not come spontaneously."[143] We may perhaps conclude from these statements that Nazimova had a good grasp of the personal flaws which led to her downfall.

Yet another foible may be indicated by the continual references to Nazimova's strong-willed behavior while she was in Hollywood making silent films. An article written by Katherine Brush in 1923 suggests that the actress had developed a reputation for being difficult to direct. "Many a director, accustomed to absolute control over his star and his cast, has crossed swords with her and either bowed to defeat or been requested to hand in his resignation."[144]

As early as War Brides Nazimova evidently had trouble working compatibly with her directors. An article which appeared in the Cleveland Leader during the making of that film gives the reader a hint of the Nazimova "temperament" which often caused problems.

> A large sign requesting silence--nobody excepted--is at present hanging in Herbert Brenon's new studio, owing to another demonstration of Alla Nazimova's temperament. She declared she was an

> artist and refused to work if there was loud talk and hammering. . . . Brenon has supplied everybody with rubber heels, especially the carpenters and the scene shifters.[145]

Conflicts are also reported in the Photoplay letter[146] and by Arthur Mayer in Merely Colossal, who indicates that Nazimova was equally difficult to work with when she was making her own films. "Alla Nazimova's films proved so costly in reshootings, lighting, make-up and cutting, and then did so poorly at the box office that one critic called her 'a luxury only America could afford.'"[147]

The silent film career of Alla Nazimova was over by 1925. Most film critics believe that within her ten year career she had made several significant contributions to the industry which had finally rebuffed her. Unquestionably Nazimova had been the first of the so called "sexotic" leading women who would people the screen for years to come. Lewis Jacobs, in the book The Rise of the American Film, describes this facet of her career.

> One of the most beloved screen actresses, she had a neurotic quality, then called "bizzare" that was to be noticeable in personalities who supplanted her in popularity in the following years-- Gloria Swanson, Pola Negri and Greta Garbo.[148]

Gilbert Seldes, in his book The Movies Come From America, suggests that Nazimova was one of the fine pantomimic artists of the silent screen. "Pantomime as a great art is practiced by a very small number of

players. Chaplin and W. C. Fields are in the first line, of course, and Emil Jannings in his better pictures; Alla Nazimova, Garbo . . . ."[149]

Another Nazimova contribution to the art of the film was proposed by De Witt Bodeen. Throughout her career in film the actress controlled most aspects of her productions. Katherine Brush reported, "She assists in the writing of the scenario, designs her own set, buys her gowns, helps direct herself and others of the cast in her scenes, and when the picture is virtually completed she supervises the cutting and the assembling of the print."[150] Bodeen believes that the care she took of her films gave them "far better production values than those accorded the movies of her contemporaries exotics."[151]

Nazimova's career in silent film was summarized by Caroline Le Jeune in Cinema.

> Nazimova gained little from her stories and nothing from her directors; she felt cinema more keenly than her directors from the start and her pantomime was more romantic, more exciting than any scenario. What raw stuff there was in Out of the Fog, An Eye for an Eye, and Revelation! Crude slates of sentiment and passion, flat photography, broken continuity, trite villainy, sprawly, obvious direction! The Red Lantern and Camille were better, but they never got beyond the limits of popular romantic tragedy for the small-town crowd. Salome, the best material of all was in bondage to its literary conception and definitely at odds with Nazimova's own non-literary miming of the name part. But in them all the single startling figure of the actress persuaded us to an admiration beyond the scope of the film; she was plain and lovely and stirred our

> senses with her body, ageing and young, and a perpetual challenge to the mind.[152]

In 1940, fifteen years after her silent film career was over, Nazimova gave her personal appraisal of the import of her years in Hollywood.

> When you are as old as I am, I guess you develop a philosophy. I don't mind any more that Hollywood used me up and then turned me out when I had no more to offer. If it was all to do over again, I'd not make a single change.
>
> Hollywood taught me so much, I would not have missed the experience for anything. I was sad, of course, to discover that I no longer was wanted. But it made a better actress of me I am sure.[153]

Doubtless, in 1925 Hollywood and Nazimova deemed her film career a failure. In retrospect, however, we may credit the actress with the creation of several quite good films like A Red Lantern and A Doll's House, applaud her emphasis on better film techniques, and especially note her establishment of the vogue for the bizarre and the mature woman in films.

> Alla Nazimova, perhaps best personified the new ideal. [The mature woman of the world] She came to the screen as a distinct type, later to become the vogue. Described as "the current wonder of the films," she had a pale face, dark hair, a large and eloquent mouth, and deep "telling" eyes. She was the "well of emotion and sensitivity" that, a decade before had been represented on the stage by Sarah Bernhardt. Nazimova was said to have been especially appealing to the women, and was the first to portray woman as a deeply emotional personality who has within her not only passion but a creativeness and intellectual depth once assumed to exist only in man.[154]

Footnotes

[1]*New York Times*, January 26, 1915, 11:4.

[2]"Nazimova in *War Brides*," *Theatre*, XXI (March, 1915), 116.

[3]*New York Times*, February 1, 1927, 24:6.

[4]J. T. Grein, unidentified newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[5]*New York Times*, January 17, 1928, 23:3.

[6]*Ibid*.

[7]*New York Times*, December 9, 1927, 28:3.

[8]Bob Thomas, *Selznick* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 26.

[9]Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1939), p. 214.

[10]*New York Times*, November 13, 1916, 11:1.

[11]Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film*, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

[12]De Witt Bodeen, "Nazimova," *Films in Review*, XXIII (December, 1972), 587.

[13]*Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 21, 1918, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[14]*New York Times*, February 18, 1913, 9:5.

[15]*New York Times*, May 13, 1918, 11:3.

[16]Unidentified newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[17]*Dramatic Mirror*, March, 1920, 588.

[18]Philadelphia Inquirer, March 18, 1919, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[19]New York Times, February 10, 1919, 11:3.

[20]Photoplay Journal, XLVI (May, 1919), 23.

[21]New York Times, May 5, 1919, 11:1.

[22]New York Times, December 23, 1918, 9:1.

[23]Philadelphia Inquirer, February 2, 1919, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[24]New York Times, November 3, 1919, 13:3.

[25]Frederick Palmer, Photoplay Plot Encyclopedia (Los Angeles: Palmer Photoplay Corporation, 1920), p. 136.

[26]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 592.

[27]Philadelphia Inquirer, June 8, 1920, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[28]New York Mirror, April 17, 1920, 14:3.

[29]New York Times, April 12, 1920, 13:1.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Program from Springer's Theatre, February 6, 7, 8, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[32]Philadelphia Inquirer, March 1, 1921, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[33]Lucius Beebe, Herald Tribune (New York), March 20, 1932, 12:1.

[34]Philadelphia Inquirer, undated newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[35]New York Times, October 25, 1920, 18:1.

[36]Edward Wagenknecht, The Movies in the Age of Innocence (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 179.

[37]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 592.

[38]Irving Shulman, Valentino (New York: Trident Press, 1967), p. 145.

[39]Quoted from the Camille film titles.

[40]Philadelphia Inquirer, November 22, 1921, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[41]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 592.

[42]Sheila Graham, The Garden of Allah (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1970), p. 26.

[43]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 577.

[44]Ibid., p. 594.

[45]Photoplay Journal, quoted in Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 594.

[46]Thomas Craven, "Salome and the Cinema," New Republic, XXXIII (January 24, 1923), 225.

[47]New York Herald, October 22, 1922, 13:2.

[48]Unidentified newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[49]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 594.

[50]New York Times, October 28, 1924, 23:4.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Mordaunt Hall, New York Times, January 20, 1925, 18:2.

[53]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 595.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[56]In a personal interview with the author on September 19, 1973 Mervyn Le Roy disagreed with the statement made by Graham. Le Roy said that some minor cuts may have been made, but that most of Nazimova's scenes were left intact.

[57]Bosley Crowther, New York Times, November 1, 1940, 33:1.

[58]David Robinson, "Player's Witness: Notes on Some Early Acting Performances Preserved in the National Film Archive," Sight and Sound, XXIX (Summer, 1960), 150.

[59]Herald Tribune (New York), May 23, 1941, 12:2.

[60]Bosley Crowther, New York Times, February 12, 1944, 11:2.

[61]Robinson, "Player's Witness," op. cit., p. 150.

[62]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 600.

[63]Joe Franklin, Classics of the Silent Screen (New York: Bramhall House, 1959), p. 207.

[64]George Middleton, These Things Are Mine (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 265.

[65]Jack Spears, Hollywood: The Golden Era (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1971), pp. 12-13.

[66]Joseph Laurie, Vaudeville (New York: Holt and Co., 1953), p. 51.

[67]New York Times, January 25, 1915, 12:1.

[68]Djuna Barnes, "Alla Nazimova, One of the Greatest of Living Actresses Talks of her Art," Theatre Guild Magazine, VII (June, 1930), 32.

[69]Louis V. De Foe, "Nazimova At Last Meets Her Big Promise," Green Book Magazine, XIII (May, 1915), 908.

[70]Middleton, These Things Are Mine, op. cit., p. 267.

[71]Marian Spitzer, The Palace (New York: Atheneum, 1960), p. 37.

[72]Ibid.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Douglas Gilbert, American Vaudeville (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1940), p. 324.

[75]New York Times, October 30, 1923.

[76]Ibid.

[77]Ibid.

[78]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 585.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Ibid.

[81]Jacobs, The Rise of the American Film, op. cit., p. 214.

[82]Graham, The Garden of Allah, op. cit., p. 15.

[83]New York Times, November 13, 1916, 11:1.

[84]Ibid.

[85]Graham, The Garden of Allah, op. cit., p. 15.

[86]Kevin Brownlow, The Parade's Gone By (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. 353.

[87]New York Times, May 5, 1919, 11:1.

[88]"Red Lantern," Photoplay Journal, XLIV (July, 1919), 77.

[89]New York Times, May 5, 1919, 11:1.

[90]Milford Chronicle, undated newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[91]Herb Sterne, "Rob Wagner's Scripts," quoted in Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 591.

[92]Alexander Kirkland, "The Woman from Yalta," Theatre Arts Monthly, (December, 1949), 38.

[93]Lawrence Reid, Motion Picture News (May 10, 1919), 23.

[94]Wagenknecht, The Movies in the Age of Innocence, op. cit., p. 277.

[95]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 591.

[96]Photoplay, quoted in Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 594.

[97]New York Times, February 13, 1922, 10:1.

[98]Ibid.

[99]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 594.

[100]Ibsen wrote a new ending for A Doll's House when the German actress Frau Neimann-Raabe refused to perform the play if Nora left her home. The new ending negated the power of the play, however, and was only performed for a few years.

[101]New York Times, February 13, 1922, 10:1.

[102]Ibid.

[103]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 594.

[104]Ibid.

[105]Jacobs, The Rise of the American Film, op. cit., p. 333.

[106]New York Times, January 1, 1923, 18:1.

[107]Kenneth MacGowan, Behind the Screen (New York: Delacorte Press, 1965), p. 192.

[108]Wagenknecht, The Movies in the Age of Innocence, op. cit., p. 277.

[109]Alice Brady, "Movies and Mummers," The Drama, XIV (November, 1923), 46.

[110]Craven, "Salome and the Cinema," op. cit., p. 226.

[111]Ibid., pp. 225-26.

[112]Bosley Crowther, New York Times, February 15, 1967, 42:2.

[113]Wagenknecht, The Movies in the Age of Innocence, op. cit., p. 179.

[114]New York Times, January 1, 1923, 18:1.

[115]Ibid.

[116]John Farrar, "Movie Frills and Furbelows," Ladies Home Journal, XLI (October, 1924), 41.

[117]Lee Frank, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[118]New York Times, January 1, 1923, 18:1.

[119]Ibid.

[120]Craven, "Salome and the Cinema," op. cit., p. 226.

[121]Michael Bruno, Venus in Hollywood (New York: Lyle Stuart, Inc., 1970), p. 35.

[122]Craven, "Salome and the Cinema," op. cit., p. 226.

[123]C. H. Bonte, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[124]Photoplay, quoted in Wagenknecht, The Movies in the Age of Innocence, op. cit., p. 179.

[125]Deems Taylor, A Pictorial History of the Movies (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), p. 141.

[126]The Midnight Raymond Chandler (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1971), p. 37.

[127]Unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[128]Alla Nazimova, "I Come Full Circle," Theatre Magazine, XLIX (April, 1928), 74.

[129]Unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[130]Wagenknecht, The Movies in the Age of Innocence, op. cit., pp. 178-79.

[131]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 592.

[132]Wagenknecht, The Movies in the Age of Innocence, op. cit., p. 178.

[133]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 588.

[134]Kirkland, "The Woman from Yalta," op. cit., p. 38.

[135]"An Open Letter to Madame Alla Nazimova," Photoplay, (August, 1921), 31.

[136]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 577.

[137]Philadelphia Record, March 1, 1923, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[138]Unidentified newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[139]Hazel Simpson Naylor, "My Devilish Ambition," Motion Picture Magazine, XV (July, 1918), 57.

[140]Ibid.

[141]David Arnold Balch, "Nazimova: Just Human Being," PhotoDrama Magazine (May 19, 1921), 36.

[142]Lillian Montanye, "A Half Hour with Nazimova," Motion Picture Classic, IV (July, 1923), 89.

[143]Fran Markel, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[144]Katherine Brush, "Nazimova--Player of Roles," National Magazine, LII (July, 1923), 89.

[145]Cleveland Leader, August 24, 1916, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[146]"An Open Letter to Madame Alla Nazimova," op. cit., p. 31.

[147]Arthur Mayer, Merely Colossal (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), p. 149.

[148]Jacobs, The Rise of the American Film, op. cit., p. 273.

[149]Gilbert Seldes, The Movies Came From America (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1937), p. 97.

[150]Brush, "Nazimova--Player of Roles," op. cit., p. 58.

[151]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 588.

[152]Caroline Alice Le Jeune, Cinema (London: Alexander Maclehose and Co., 1931), p. 80.

[153]Franklin K. Arthur, Richmond News Leader, July 8, 1940, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[154]Jacobs, The Rise of the American Film, op. cit., pp. 272-73.

CHAPTER V

THE LAST YEARS ON BROADWAY

Biography

In October, 1928, after ten years of work in vaudeville and film Nazimova returned to the stages of Broadway. She was forty-nine years old and would spend the next ten years of her life gracing the legitimate stage. Once again she would receive critical acclaim, once again Nazimova would be called a "star."

The artist's resurgence began in conjunction with another remarkable woman of the theatre, Eva Le Gallienne. In 1926 Miss Le Gallienne created the Civic Repertory Theatre, where, for six years, she directed and performed the classics of the European and American stage. The seemingly ideal merger between the two European actresses occurred in 1929 when Le Gallienne invited Nazimova to join the Civic Repertory Theatre. Nazimova reported,

> One day she [Eva le Gallienne] came and asked me whether I would like to join her company. I told her I would like to see some of her performances. I saw The Cradle Song and The Good Hope. And for the first time since I left the Moscow Art Theatre I had the feeling, "Here is something worth while.

> Here is someone who is striving to have a theatre." It was the whole effect which impressed me--the way the plays were produced, the atmosphere of the theatre, youngsters backstage with high hopes and no cares, or at least few worries, with nothing petty to nag at them. And all of it carried out in self-effacing spirit of a true repertory basis. My answer was ready at once: "Yes, take me on."[1]

The next part of this article, which Nazimova wrote for Theatre Magazine in April, 1928, gives the reader an inclination that the actress approached the union with Miss Le Gallienne somewhat cautiously.

> Eva said: "Will you trust me?" I replied: "I wouldn't come if I didn't." We were very careful in making the announcements to make it clear that I was not joining as a star. I insisted that the policy of the theatre remain unchanged, that I was to be only a member of the company. And so it was that I joined it. As long as I am of use, I will remain.[2]

Although Nazimova may not have joined the Civic Repertory Theatre as a star, she did receive the highest salary paid any member of the company, $400 a week. Albeit Howard Taubman called the $400 a "measly fee compared with the salaries in four figures commanded on Broadway in the twenties by a luminary of Nazimova's eminence."[3]

Madame Ranevsky in Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard was Nazimova's first role with the Civic Repertory Theatre. It was her first opportunity to play a mature role. "I was still doing the coy, untamed maidens, though I was really getting on in years. My release came with The Cherry Orchard--Madame Ranevsky, a woman--and I was as happy as a lark."[4] In addition to providing

a mature role, the Chekhov drama returned Nazimova to performing in the classics of the European theatre, which she understood and almost invariably enhanced.

Critically The Cherry Orchard could be considered a success. Years later Howard Taubman called the performance "shimmering," and at the time the production was favorably compared to an earlier performance by the Moscow Art Theatre. In fact, thirty-six years later Fitzroy Davis was able to state: "I personally think the best production of the play I have seen was the one Miss Le Gallienne staged at the New Amsterdam in 1932 with Nazimova as Madame Ranevskaya and herself as Varya."[6] Nazimova's return to the stage was repeatedly accounted a triumph.

January 14, 1929, in contrast, saw the opening of one of Nazimova's least remembered performances on the American stage. The Civic Repertory Theatre's production of The Lady from Albaqueque was too short to be accepted as a one evening's entertainment in the theatre, so an early Chekhov one-act called On the High Road was selected as a curtain raiser. The short play's claim to fame came from its apparent censorship in Russia. In fact, according to the New York Times, Chekhov himself did not own a copy of the drama he had written.[7] The script was found in the Russian censor's office after his death. On the High Road "is the grim and turgid

story of a Russian landowner who had degenerated from gentility to drunken vagrancy for love of an unfaithful wife."[8] While Nazimova did perform in the brief play, her name is not even mentioned in the New York Times review; probably that fact alone makes the play unique among her theatrical vehicles in the United States. The double bill did not fare well with the critics and closed after a short run. The New York Times review of On the High Road concludes with the following statement:

> Under Miss Le Gallienne's direction, the actors play it with so much pungency that the maudlin theatricalism of an apprentice job is much less trying than it might be.[9]

The play was presumably quickly forgotten.

The third production which Nazimova appeared in with the Civic Repertory Theatre was Leonid Andreyev's somber drama Katerina. The play was directed by Eva Le Gallienne and designed by Aline Bernstein. It opened in New York on February 25, 1929 and closed on April 15, 1929 after 19 performances.

Andreyev's Katerina tells the story of a woman who takes many lovers after her husband falsely accuses her of infidelity. The husband discovers his error and begs his wife for forgiveness, but Katerina, tormented by the conflict between her sin and her husband's pardon, finally decides to abandon her marriage. Nazimova played the title role in the drama. While most critics did not consider the play comparable to Andreyev's previous

writing, they were willing to concede that Nazimova was effective as the pungent heroine. Brooks Atkinson remarked, "If Andreyev were as tensile in the writing as Nazimova is in the acting, you would not begrudge him his private torment."[10]

The reviews of Nazimova's depiction of Katerina hark markedly back to the vivid visual descritpions which critics indulged in when the actress first performed in the United States. In fact, there were even comments about her "exotic and decadent type of art,"[11] distinctly reminiscent of the movie image which the actress claimed she was trying to repress. Consistent with the reviewers' emphasis on the visual, Brooks Atkinson described the actress's "lily-white," and "remarkably bold, deep costumes,"[12] as did De Casseres. "She trilled all the gamuts with ease and fastens on the spectator's mind, whether she is dressed in white, black or hardly anything at all."[13] When the play toured to Philadelphia one reviewer compared the actress favorably with Bernhardt and claimed the return of "the Nazimova of fiteen years ago, the great magnetic flaming Nazimova we used to know."[14] The same critic stated that Nazimova's elaborate portrayal of Katerina had been evoked by the playwright.

> You may say that the Russian star acted at times in the grandly emotional manner of yesterday, but you will have to admit that this part and this play called for just such a broadly sketched, robust majestic interpretation.[15]

In spite of the critics' stress on the poor play, the weak supporting players, the slow-paced direction of Miss Le Gallienne, and the exotic appearance of the peregrine leading lady, most of their rank and file paid hommage to Nazimova's skillful acting in Katerina. Another Philadelphia critic remarked:

> One must lavish praise with ungrudging hand to do justice to Nazimova's superb characterization. Whether or not one agrees with the Andreyev logic, . . . it was impossible to watch except with admiration the fine contrasts the actress brought to illuminate the obscure spots and give verisimilitude to a difficult situation. Her shadings were at time the barest of prismatic changes; again they became emotional clashes of color that thrilled. But each varying mood had its own value which, molded into a whole, made a canvas that repelled while it attracted; that in drawing, repulsed.[16]

Another critic, Wilfred J. Riley, found the play "long, heavy and cumbersome,"[17] but he, too, admired the Russian performer's work. He remarked,

> Nazimova gives a singularly intelligent performance as the ill-fated Katerina, and it is her interpretation of the role that gives the play what little power it now holds. . . . Nazimova lives the part, an attribute that is none too common among the newer artists.[18]

Theatre Arts Monthly's "Broadway in Review" section printed the following evaluation of Nazimova as Katerina. "Madame Nazimova puts all the others to shade, with a character study beautiful, underlined with lovely gestures, showing mysterious layers of feeling."[19] Heywood Broun concurred as he cited a Nazimova who "is able to take all the mildewed firecrackers of this discrepit

piece and make them all go bang! bang!"[20] Once again, as in her earlier years on Broadway, Nazimova had illuminated a poor play through a virtuoso performance, and the critics described it at length.

In July, 1930 Nazimova unexpectedly withdrew from the Civic Repertory Theatre. Presumably the departure was engendered by a conflict between Miss Le Gallienne and her leading actress. The New York Telegram reported several reasons for the blow-up. Evidently Nazimova and Le Gallienne had disagreed over the billing for the road tour of The Cherry Orchard; in addition Nazimova had demanded a special dressing room at the theatre, off by herself, and at one point she had threatened to leave because her dressing room was too warm. The paper blamed the break on "too much temperament."[21] One may conjecture that perhaps Nazimova had become too accustomed to being treated like a "star" to fit in with the Le Gallienne concept of the Civic Repertory Theatre. One result of the break was that audiences never got an opportunity to see Nazimova in a projected production of Chekhov's Three Sisters.

The year 1930 saw the beginning of Nazimova's felicitous association with the Theatre Guild, the organization under whose auspices the actress would appear in five productions in as many years. In fact, the year 1930 was an ambitious one for the Guild. Their productions

included the successful Elizabeth the Queen with Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, Shaw's The Apple Cart, Philip Barry's Hotel Universe and the play in which Nazimova made her Guild debut, Turgenev's A Month in the Country.

The Turgenev masterpiece was given an elaborate production by the Theatre Guild. The sets and costumes were reproduced by Raymond Sovey from the original designs by M. S. Dobuzinsky, and Rouben Mamoulian was selected to direct. The play had its American premiere at the National Theatre in Washington D. C. on March 10, 1930, before moving on to New York. The reviews were mixed. Most critics were not overly enthusiastic about the "creaky gig,"[22] but Nazimova, who was once again playing the part of a frustrated woman, generally earned favorable notices. Critical response might be summarized by the Stirling Bowen comment: "No one can quite compare with Alla Nazimova in making a Turgenev woman clear and significant as a character for the American stage."[23]

A novel note sounded in the reviews of Nazimova's performance in A Month in the Country was an expression of appreciation for her skills as a comedienne. Henry Murdock described her as giving a " . . . vivid and alert characterization which makes one wonder why her talents as a comedienne have not been more often employed."[24] But, in general, Murdock was alone in writing of his delight in the actress's comic ability.[25]

Nazimova's next performance for the Theatre Guild was in their legendary production of Mourning Becomes Electra. Lawrence Langner, a mentor of the Guild, felt that in this difficult play Nazimova gave her finest performance.

> The highest point in Nazimova's career, in my opinion, was her portrayal of Christine in O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra. In this part she combined feminine allure with the strength of passion which made entirely credible the love affair between herself and the sea captain, Adam Brant, a man considerably younger.

For once in Nazimova's career, no one could say that she was working with an inferior cast. Most critics thought all five leading performers were brilliant, but special appreciation always went to Nazimova and Alice Brady, who played Lavinia.

The production of Mourning Becomes Electra was a high point for Nazimova and for the Theatre Guild as well.

> Mourning Becomes Electra undoubtedly must be considered a landmark in the American theatre, as its 150 performances during its maiden New York stay were quite a respectable showing for an offering of such gloomy intensity. Its lift to the Guild prestige and morale was tremendous, although benefit to the Guild's exchequer was not quite so gratifying.[27]

O'Neill's classic three-part drama was performed at the Theatre Guild during the season of 1931 and 1932. For Nazimova the performance of this play proved unique. Mourning Becomes Electra was to be the only American drama the actress appeared in which would receive good

reviews for both the star and the play.[28]

The subsequent drama in which the Theatre Guild offered its subscribers a view of Madame Nazimova was Owen and Donald Davis's dramatization of Pearl Buck's The Good Earth. Directed by Philip Moeller, designed by Lee Simonson, and incorporating the acting talents of Claude Rains and Sydney Greenstreet as well as Nazimova, the production opened at the Guild Theatre on October 16, 1932. Unfortunately most critics agreed that the popular novel had not been transformed into an effective play. Brooks Atkinson reported:

> There is no use denying that the ineffectual post-card scenes of China that potter around the stage in the Davis translation have nothing to recommend them to the playgoer in search of real life or artificial beauty, nor do the actors bring any of the characters into existence. Uncharitable as it may be to say so, The Good Earth is a complete failure on the stage.[29]

The Guild's leading lady, who Waldau reports had been "the unanimous choice for the leading role of O'lan"[30] did receive a few notices complimenting her portrayal of the Chinese peasant woman. Even the deprecatory Brooks Atkinson remarked, "Nazimova has in the early scenes an interior image of the dumb, clumsy peasant that goes straight to the heart of that magnificent character."[31] In general, however, the response to the play was unanimously negative. Once again Nazimova had failed to achieve success in an American drama,

although this time she was playing a Chinese rather than an American woman.

After the arduous role of Christine in Mourning Becomes Electra and the difficulties inherent in portraying a Chinese peasant woman, Nazimova returned to a play by one of her native dramatists. The actress's next performance was in a revival of the Civic Repertory Theatre's production of Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard. Nazimova agreed to appear in the revival, although she did not appear in any subsequent productions with the group. The Cherry Orchard opened on March 7, 1933 at the New Amsterdam Theatre on Forty Second Street. It had been revived and brought to Broadway, along with Le Gallienne's popular production of Alice in Wonderland, in order to earn money to finance future Civic Repertory Theatre efforts. Once again Nazimova and the rest of the almost duplicate cast of The Cherry Orchard were given a stamp of approval by the reviewers.

Eight months later Nazimova returned to Broadway in a three-person play adapted by Laura Walker from the Polish of Maja M. Szepowska. Entitled Doctor Monica, the "rather foolish"[32] drama concerned a woman doctor, portrayed by Nazimova, who discovered that her husband had been sleeping with the maid.

The rather dismal notices accorded the Polish drama gave to Nazimova the only favorable words that were

written about the production, but even her reviews were not all praise. Joseph Wood Krutch found the play "slow moving, lugubrious, and painfully old fashioned;" however, while praising Nazimova for earlier performances in Mourning Becomes Electra and The Wild Duck, he did take time to compliment the actress for "moments of grotesque power" in her performance as Doctor Monica.[33] The New York Times reviewer reported: "By dint of invincible effort, she makes the physician appear sometimes like a real person. It is the play that fails."[34] This opinion was shared by the critic for Theatre Arts Monthly who wrote: "But only Doctor Monica believed in her part."[35]

John Mason Brown of the New York Evening Post also denigrated the play, but in addition he castigated the director. In a sensitive appraisal of Nazimova's acting style, the responsive critic gave the following description of the unfortunate effect that acting in the poor play had upon Nazimova's histrionics. He suggested that the actress's attributes seemed to be responsible for the defects in her characterization of Doctor Monica.

> She was forced to rely upon those very qualities which usually contribute to the magnificent theatricality of her person in order to lend persuasion to the evening. Her natural inclination was to try to cover up the deficiencies of the play by means of her acting. But in attempting to do this very thing, she succumbed--as even the best of actresses will and as only the best of actresses can--to the temptation of overacting. . . . Madame Nazimova abandoned herself with relish to the mock heroics of melodrama. She moaned and groaned, tottered

> in agony around the stage, spoke with an unnatural slowness, and in general proved as insistent in her overemphasis as is a clock that strikes twelve at every hour of the day and night.[36]

Brown concluded his review by stating: "Her best and the modern theatre's best have coincided too frequently not to make both Doctor Monica and her share in it regrettable."[37]

The theatre-going public of 1934 did not see any performances by Nazimova upon the legitimate stage. The actress did appear on radio, however, in a thumbnail sketch dealing with the subject of child labor. The program was part of the International Ladies Garment Worker's Union's series of Friday night programs on WEVD, New York.[38]

The year 1935, however, brought Nazimova back to the stage. The actress appeared in two different plays during that year. The first drama, sponsored again by the Theatre Guild, was Shaw's The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles. The second play, considered by many to be the highlight of her career, was Ibsen's Ghosts.

The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles could never be considered one of Shaw's best plays. Percy Hammond described it.

> The play is a collection of Mr. Shaw's favorite museum pieces posed in a gallery located on an island in the Nightmare Sea. That makes that atom of mythical geography the forum for a rambling discussion of what's-it-all-about. . . . The conclusions and the events which lead up to them are,

> to batter a down-and-out adjective, Shavian. Like a dignified monkey he climbs a tree and pelts us with edifying coconuts--an experience that frequently becomes exceedingly onerous.[39]

The Theatre Guild was well aware of the flawed nature of Shaw's opus, but it elected to produce the play anyway. The playwright was in his eighties and the Theatre Guild felt it owed him an obligation as a revered contributor to their organization. The Guild decided, therefore,

> . . . to present his new offering using an inexpensive stylized setting, and otherwise cutting corners. Dudley Digges was approached to act as director for The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles, but because he demanded an "exorbitant fee," several alternatives were considered, including Worthington Miner, Robert Sinclair, and Antoinette Perry. Finally, Harry Wagstaff Gribble, who had demonstrated a flair for enlivening unusual scripts, was selected and rehearsals began with Nazimova and Romney Brent in the leading roles.[40]

When the play opened Nazimova once again received fairly good notices for her performance in a play that was classified as poor. Brooks Atkinson noted that the play was "unconscionably boring,"[41] but he saluted the actress in the following selection from his review: "Nazimova gives a remarkably young performance as the island priestess; her acting is fairly glowing with confidence in life."[42] When the play opened in Ann Arbor, Michigan in the Drama Season, the local critic was also impressed by Nazimova's convincing performance in the strange play.

> Nazimova, in a part which doesn't give her too much to say, is, as everyone expected she would be, quite

> convincing. I thought she was a bit on the dew and honey side in the first act scene about nature. . . . Otherwise she was very good.

Lawrence Langner introduces an arresting note in his discussion of Nazimova's performance in the role of Priestess Prola. In both of his books, Magic Curtain and G. B. S. and the Lunatic, the Theatre Guild director marvelled at the different ways that Nazimova played the part, although she evidently was not aware of her variation.

> Nazimova, not unexpectedly, had difficulty in mastering a role in which she fluctuated between a religieuse, a seductress, a sybil and a saint, and she finally settled for the seductress, which came more naturally. However, her interpretation sometimes became incongruous when she carried the seductress too far into the saintlier aspects of the role. One evening she would give a brilliant performance, the next evening a ghastly one. "I was bad tonight, wasn't I?" she asked me in her dressing room after the play. "Yes, but you were wonderful yesterday evening," I replied, comforting her. "Tell me, Lawrence," she said, "What is the difference between my performance tonight and my performance yesterday.[44]

Langner reported, however, that "whatever kind of character she started with, on a particular night, she ended with." He concluded his remarks on the play by stating that the production of The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles had been fortuitous for Nazimova for at least one reason.

> The playing of this role, which earned her no great credit, resulted in a pact between her and Romney Brent to play together in Ibsen's Ghosts, a project which they brought off later with great acclaim.[45]

Although Romney Brent had to drop out of the production of Ghosts before it reached Broadway's Empire Theatre on December 12, 1935, Nazimova appeared and received frequent praise for her performance as Mrs. Alving. Theron Bamberger described the production's reception, which some reports indicate included twenty curtain calls.

> The opening night was a sensation. The theatre manager said it was the greatest ovation since Sarah Bernhardt had played there. As the final curtain descended the audience sat in spellbound silence. Then came thunderous applause, then cheers, Madame was overwhelmed.[46]

For the first time since Mourning Becomes Electra, with the possible exception of the Civic Repertory Theatre's revival of The Cherry Orchard, Nazimova was performing in a critical success. The success must have been doubly satisfying because the actress had directed the play as well as performing the leading role--always an onerous task in the theatre.

The production of Ghosts kept Nazimova fully occupied for almost a year. Prior to Broadway the play was performed at the Pabst Theatre in Milwaukee and at the Drama Season in Ann Arbor, Michigan during the month of May, 1935; then it went on to Detroit. The production opened at the Empire Theatre in New York in December of 1935 and played for seven weeks; after that a short tour was scheduled. Ghosts returned to New York's Golden Theatre on March 11, 1936 where Nazimova requested that

the ticket prices be kept low. After the second stay in New York City the production toured to the Pacific Coast and back, playing in Boston, St. Louis, Kansas City, Denver, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Los Angeles and other cities along the way. The play proved to be a real artistic success; Nazimova was performing it as late as August, 1939 at the Westport Country Playhouse in Connecticut.

> This production of Ghosts will remain a high theatre landmark; . . . the cool distinction of Stewart Chaney's set (his best work, too), and Nazimova's Mrs. Alving. Soaring above even her own immeasurable record, Nazimova here touches greatness; joins the luminous tradition of Duse and Mrs. Fiske. She has created out of Ibsen's didactic heroine, always more of a thesis than a woman, a person of such nobility, pale anguish, wisdom, and tenderness as will always be remembered in our theatre.[47]

While Nazimova's production of Ghosts performed to full audiences at the Golden Theatre in New York City the management took a poll to see which play their leading actress should appear in next. Hedda Gabler got 1,920 votes while The Cherry Orchard only received 1,662; therefore, it was decided that Nazimova's next production would be a revival of Hedda Gabler, with the actress playing a role she had not performed since the Hopkins season in 1918.

Hedda Gabler was the second play produced during the 1930s for which Nazimova performed the dual role of director and actress. Hedda Gabler, however, was unlike the role of Mrs. Alving in Ghosts, because the actress

had already performed it many times in her career. Although many critics had already seen Nazimova play Hedda, most of them found her third English-speaking production of the play to be a worthy theatre experience. Grenville Vernon of Commonweal had seen the original production in 1906; he found the 1936 production superior. He reported:

> This extraordinary artist doesn't look a day older than she did in that far away time!
> . . . . . .
> Her impersonation has changed, but distinctly for the better. It was then exotic, serpentine, extravagant; today it is well molded, carefully thought out, consistent from beginning to end.[48]

For Hedda Gabler Nazimova employed many of the same actors and the same designers as she had used in her production of Ghosts. The designers were Stewart Chaney for the settings and Abe Feder for the lights. The play, which opened on November 16, 1936 at the Longacre Theatre, did not, however, receive the critical adulation which had characterized the response to Ghosts. One major complaint was that the company did not live up to the work of the leading lady. Brooks Atkinson wrote:

> Harry Ellerbe underestimates the intelligence that lies under the fustiness of George Tesman. In the opening scene Leslie Bingham accents the silliness of Aunt Julia at the expense of the play. In her subdued moments Viola Frayne acts a persuasive Mrs. Elvsted, but in the highly emotional scenes she breaks the spell with strident and scrappy vocal tones. McKay Morris is a satisfactory Judge Brack, when he is intelligible, and Edward Trevor gives a good surface portrait of Eilert Lovborg.[49]

While disparaging the company Atkinson found the star's performance riveting, even though it is fairly clear that he did not agree with her interpretation of the role.

> She can transcend dissembling facts into the inky poisonous spirit of evil. Especially in the final act, when she is dressed in black and sinks down into the depth of a chair much too large for her, she is a preternatural figure, a phantom of malevolence, a Satanic ghost shrinking from the man-made world that is closing around her. Nazimova takes Hedda out of the play into the sphere of fiendish imagination.[50]

With her return to Hedda Gabler Nazimova had, in a sense, made a full circle in the theatre. It was not, however, her final English speaking production on the American stage, although it had been her first. In March, 1939 she opened at the Lyceum Theatre in New York in a production of Karel Capek's The Mother. The play was directed by Miles Malleson, produced by Victor Payne-Jennings in association with Kathleen Robinson, and it included a young Montgomery Clift in the cast. Nazimova's final production on the stage received a critical response which had almost become a pattern for the non-classical dramas graced by the star. The play was reported inferior, but the actress's performance was reported superior.

The Mother told the story of a woman who lost her husband and her five sons to war, science and civil strife. It was a "novel drama, too, for the dead men

each come back to talk to her and finally urge her to let her last son defend his country against invasion."[51] "She only capitulates when a radio voice announces the bombing of schools and the murder of little children."[52] The play, which was successfully produced in London just prior to the New York presentation, undoubtedly seemed timely in the spring of 1939, shortly before the outbreak of World War II.

Most critics not only found the play weak, but in addition they refuted the direction of Miles Malleson. Atkinson found his work "full of rigid attitudes, formal groupings and quite a lot of old hat."[53] His reaction was typical. Another reviewer was especially disturbed by the "unhappy assortment of acting styles and accents,"[54] a complaint which could only be laid at the feet of the director, although other critics pointed out that the play was poorly cast, which may not have been his fault.

Brooks Atkinson reported that, although the play was weak, Nazimova's performance made attending the theatre a valuable experience.

> Nazimova, an actress of great perceptions, plays the part of the mother with remarkable breadth and scope. For so slight a woman she had tremendous volume. It is no casual tragedy as she portrays it, but the tragedy of the ages, with all maternal sufferings caught in the torment of one woman. But no one else has seen that much in this play, and Capek was not her match in artistry.[55]

Not all the critics were as generous. One of them remarked, "Nazimova went through the motions of despair and grief, but it was an alien, Stanislavsky grief."[56] In general, however, the following statement sums up the reviews of The Mother, the last play in which Nazimova appeared on Broadway's stages: "In many ways it is not a good play, but it is definitely the triumph of an actress."[57]

Nazimova sold her Port Chester, New York home in 1937, so when she started making films again in 1940 she moved out to California. The actress spent the last few years of her life in the Hollywood area with her longtime friend and companion, Glesca Marshall. Nazimova had a severe attack of coronary thrombosis toward the end of June, 1945 and died on July 13, 1945 at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles at the age of 66. For many theatre goers she will never be forgotten. As for De Witt Bodeen,

> there has never been any doubt about the greatness of Alla Nazimova as an actress. I would not hesitate to name her the foremost actress of the 20th century American theatre. Certainly, for what she brought to this country as a disciple of the realistic school of acting, she is a towering figure. She reformed and revitalized acting in America just as Eleanora Duse did throughout Europe.[58]

Nazimova's appearances on the American stage between 1928 and 1939 were fairly consistently successful. In fact, the final phase of her career generated frequent praise and infrequent censure for the actress's

illuminating portraits of the women she selected to perform. The five plays selected for detailed analysis in this chapter exemplify the style of acting the actress employed and the type of criticism the actress received during her last decade on the stage. In this period Nazimova repeatedly performed in plays which were appealing to the theatre-going public as well as the critics.

The first play described in detail will be Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard in which Nazimova's fine performance as Madame Ranevsky was found wholly commendable. The next three plays enumerated in this chapter were all produced under the auspicies of the Theatre Guild. A Month in the Country proved to be yet another demonstration of Nazimova's skill at portraying upper-class women in plays written by European or Russian playwrights. Mourning Becomes Electra, in which Nazimova portrayed the New England matriarch Christine, was in direct contrast. It was the only American drama the actress ever appeared in to receive good reviews. The third Guild play, The Good Earth, was another American drama, but in it she did not fare as well. Both the play and Nazimova were denounced by most reviewers. The press's response to the play demonstrated that many reviewers still found that Nazimova's mannerisms became prominent and irritating when she played in poorly written dramas. The final play to be elaborated on in this chapter is

Ghosts. The excellent production demonstrated the actress's skill both as a director and performer. It proved a fitting climax to her career as a mature performer which had begun with The Cherry Orchard.

The Civic Repertory Theatre: The Cherry Orchard

The following evaluation of Nazimova's performance in The Cherry Orchard was written in 1965, twenty years after her death and thirty-five years after the critic Howard Taubman had seen her performance as Madame Ranevsky.

> Although Alla Nazimova was not born in the United States, she looms in my memory as the finest actress I have seen on our stages. Is it distance that lends enchantment? In any event, I can still call up in my mind's eye her Ranevskaya in The Cherry Orchard. It did not--and does not now in retrospect--seem like acting. This was a human being--impulsive, wistful, foolish, generous and gallant. One could not imagine that Chekhov had invented her or that Nazimova was reading an author's lines. Through a miracle a heartwarming woman out of another time and place materialized on the stage and, although her words were spoken in accented English, she was specifically old-world Russian and at the same time endearingly, credibly true here and everywhere.[59]

Taubman was not the only critic to feel that The Cherry Orchard was a play in which Nazimova's performance immortalized her. Kappo Phelan, writing an obituary of Nazimova for Commonweal in August, 1945, vividly remembered the play because, working backstage, she had been able to see most of the performances. She stated:

> I was able to steadily regard the "Lyubov An" of The Cherry Orchard for as many performances as

> it was given, and to mark its distinctness. It is true, certainly the part will never be inevitably done; it was played as written: a woman as the wind turns, the air shapes. And its infinitesimal variations were effected immediately the curtain rose, when the humor of the house was taken and judged.[60]

Miss Phelan added, "All the stage hands and technicians gathered to watch at each performance;"[61] certainly a unique compliment to the actors in the Civic Repertory Theatre production. Yet another belated review of Nazimova's performance in The Cherry Orchard is included in Alexander Kirkland's article "The Woman from Yalta," which was written in 1949 for Theatre Arts Monthly. In addition to evaluating Nazimova's performance in the play, Mr. Kirkland indicates the importance of the role to Nazimova's career.

> Nazimova's seven lean years ended abruptly in 1928 with her appearance as Madame Ranevskaya in Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard at the Civic Repertory Theatre. It was the rebirth of a great star, and as such was celebrated by the press and public alike. It was a performance of magical power and clarity. The image of her farewell to her home still lives under the eyelids of anyone who saw her.[62]

Almost all of the critics who saw Nazimova perform in Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard wrote reviews that were in the same vein as Taubman's, Phelan's, and Kirkland's articles, even though they had to write without having years to reflect upon their choice of words. Alla Nazimova's rich performance as Ranevsky received nearly unanimous praise.

The Civic Repertory Theatre's production of The Cherry Orchard, one of the great dramas of the Russian stage, opened on October 15, 1928 at the Civic Repertory Theatre itself. Staged by Eva Le Gallienne and designed by Aline Bernstein, the inventive cast included Miss Le Gallienne as Varya, Josephine Hutchinson as Anya and Paul Leyssac as Gaev, as well as Nazimova as Madame Ranevsky. Although Taubman later remarked that the Theatre itself was a "huge, decrepit barn of a house on West 14th Street,"[63] evidently the magic of the theatre was able to overcome this atmospheric inconvenience. Taubman reported that with the performance of the play, "irradiated by the special glow from Nazimova's Ranevskaya, the size, shape and smells of the theatre faded into irrelevance."[64]

Several years before Le Gallienne's production of The Cherry Orchard, the Moscow Art Theatre had brought the same play to New York City. The New York Times reviewer was pleased to report that, even though the magic of the memories of the Art Theatre's great production had not faded, the current production which was "closely modeled on the original presentation of the same drama in Russian by the Moscow Art Theatre," managed to retain "so much of its convincing quality."[65] Another critic also compared the Le Gallienne production with the Moscow Art Theatre's effort, although he found the Civic Repertory

Theatre's work to be slightly inferior to the work of the Russian company. The same critic compared Nazimova's acting to that of the great Russian actress Madame Olga Knipper-Tchekova. They both played Ranevsky. He found Nazimova's performance slightly weaker, commenting, "But she gave the flighty Madame Ranevsky more beauty, and a deal of fitful charm in her sudden moods. The suddenness, too, was effectively managed."[66]

Comparisons with the Moscow Art Theatre aside, reviewers enthusiastically praised the production, and especially Nazimova's performance. Most critics felt that the Civic Repertory Theatre's effort was the first admirable performance of the play in English on the American stage, although admittedly the actors who played the "comic parts" were castigated by the New York Times reviewer, who also felt that: "The company is not inspired."[67]

One criticism of Nazimova's performance can be found in John Mason Brown's book Dramatis Personae, even though the reviewer mitigated his criticism by his praise. He stated: "Although sometimes she pushed exoticism to laughable extremes in Eva Le Gallienne's production of The Cherry Orchard down at the Civic Repertory, she was the best Madame Ranevsky to have been seen in an American production."[68]

Critics generally praised Nazimova's performance

without specifically describing it. Brown's use of the word "exotic," however, suggests that some of the actress's mannerisms were employed effectively. The production itself was variously described as "serene," "limpid," and "modulated;"[69] since the play revolves around the character of Ranevsky, Nazimova herself must have, to a large measure, established the tempo. One critic remarked: "All the world trudges slowly through Madame Ranevsky's drawing room."[70] Nazimova may have been employing her ability to remain still on stage, a technique she often used effectively in her performances in European classics.

One aspect of Nazimova's performance was described by several critics. She evidently masterfully communicated the swiftly changing moods of the Russian noblewoman. Taubman noted her creation of an "impulsive human being,"[71] and her "sudden moods" were recalled by another writer.[72] Brooks Atkinson, writing the New York Times Sunday article, added a compliment to the actress on the rhythm and mood of her work.

> Nazimova as the gracious apathetic Madame Ranevsky plays her part with a flowing rhythm that catches every evanescent mood and intonation in this character; if the part is great, her performance can hardly fall short of greatness itself.[73]

This report was echoed by a critic who viewed The Cherry Orchard when Le Gallienne returned the play to Broadway a year later without Nazimova as Ranevsky. He found:

"Miss Maddern loses somewhat in comparison with Alla Nazimova, . . . the Russian actress was more vivid, her playing richer in shading."[74] Evidently much of the praise for Nazimova's Ranevsky was stimulated by her sensitive expression of the character's changeable temperament.

Finally, Nazimova's portrayal of Ranevsky brought the actress praise for the use of her voice.

> Here the very volatility of the character gave access to the most extraordinary voice range to be heard, I should say, on our stage. Plucked in an arpeggio of notes possible to no instrument but only to a passionate, most human voice.[75]

The Cherry Orchard proved to be an excellent vehicle for Nazimova's return to the legitimate stage. It brought her back in a mature role in a Russian drama for which she received superb reviews. It demonstrated to actors, directors, producers and critics that she had not lost her ability to give outstanding performances. The Cherry Orchard's success heralded a new phase of Nazimova's career in the American theatre.

The Theatre Guild

A Month in the Country.--This Turgenev play began Nazimova's association with the Theatre Guild. It was her first production after leaving the sheltering auspices of the Civic Repertory Theatre. Rouben Mamoulian, who was to direct the actress, described his and the Guild's

hesitation about employing the so-called "difficult" actress in the planned production. While both Mamoulian and the Guild officials felt that Nazimova was ideal for the part of Natalia Petrovna, the bored Russian woman who becomes infatuated with her son's tutor, both were nervous about casting her because of her reputation for "capriciousness and conceit"[76] and the fact that previous directors had found working with the actress could present problems.

Mamoulian visited the actress for tea at her apartment on Fifty-Seventh Street. He found her perfectly charming and decided that the risk was worthwhile; he would hire her. Mamoulian determined that judicious handling of the actress during the first few days of rehearsal would undoubtedly establish a good professional working relationship. At the first rehearsal, which was a read-through of the play, Nazimova gave what the director described as "the best first reading I ever heard."[77] Following through with his rigid policy, however, he did not compliment the actress on her superb reading. During the second and third days of rehearsal the director worked the actress strenuously. In fact, as he described it, he "went after Nazimova."[78] Mamoulian reported that at the end of the third day, Nazimova, who had been doing splendid work on her part, gave a line reading which the director found perfect. He could not resist complimenting

her, but she would not believe that he could think anything she did excellent, because he had been so strict throughout the three days of rehearsal. Mamoulian convinced Nazimova of his satisfaction with her work, however, and from then on he reported that they had an excellent working relationship. In fact, Mamoulian stated that he found the actress very easy to work with in both A Month in the Country and Blood and Sand, a film he made with Nazimova in 1941.[79]

The production of A Month in the Country was well received by the critics, even though they did not all feel that the play itself was completely satisfactory. Brooks Atkinson was adamant about the dull nature of the slender, mood piece.

> Considered in relation to its time, which was eighty years ago, it is a competent drama of complexities in love--sometimes faintly beautiful, sometimes amusing, and punctuated once or twice by frank character self-analysis. But whether it is by Turgenev or not, it is by modern standards a dull and maundering [sic] play, dated in its mannerisms and in its point of view and reclaimed from a dramatic period that is hardly worth preserving.[80]

While Atkinson's critique of the play itself was harsher than most of the other reviewer's evaluations of the work, there was general agreement that the play was tedious. Turgenev's 1840s drama was often compared with Chekhov's work, although Mamoulian felt that the comparisons were made because of the inherent Russian quality of the drama, rather than because a valid comparison

existed.[81]

Critics disliked the play, but they liked the sets, the directing, the lighting and the acting. "If you are content to see a rather unimportant play, splendidly mounted, well acted, your evening will have been well spent."[82] The highpoint of the acting was Nazimova's Natalia Petrovna. In accordance with the descriptions of Nazimova's modulated performance in The Cherry Orchard, critics were pleased to note the restraint of her work in A Month in the Country, although that opinion was not unanimous. One critic stated: "Her restraint and at the same time accuracy of portrayal brings every subtle little point in the play to its right degree of obviousness."[83] The critic who wrote the following quote appeared to agree. "Alla Nazimova . . . plays the leading role of Natalia Petrovna with a restraint and a delicate interpretation which round the character of that somewhat empty lady into a splendid performance."[84] A newspaper review written by Alice Wildey, however, suggests that Nazimova was playing the part with some of the fire which had been evident in her performances in silent pictures.

> The whole play is a masterpiece among character dramas, and Madame Nazimova's shadings are perfect. She makes Natalia fascinating, lovely, naively charming, but the sinister quality of her make-up is etched in with deep, fine, unmistakable strokes from the beginning.
> . . . . . .

> With the main character revealed by Madame Nazimova in a lightning flash that is unmistakable and the whole play taking its tone from that character, it is difficult to see how the depth of the drama and its superlatively fine workmanship can go unrecognized by such a large proportion of Guild audiences.[85]

Although Ms. Wildey did not find Nazimova's performance restrained, she evidently did admire her work. The majority of the reviews, however, seemed to agree that Nazimova was giving another rather subdued performance. Joseph Wood Krutch's review was typical. He reported that Nazimova gave "a finely modulated performance which seems to me quite the best she has achieved since her return to the stage."[86]

The actress's appropriateness for and rare understanding of the part of Natalia, the frustrated Russian gentlewoman, was frequently emphasized by the critics. Brooks Atkinson's report follows:

> As Natalia Petrovna, Alla Nazimova gives a performance of rare loveliness. With Turgenev the character may have been watery. But with her it is pale and pleading, accented with fragile gesturing and petal-like attitudes. Madame Nazimova is not only a beautiful woman, but also an actress who has mastered the myriad arts of character portrayal. It is a transparent character as Turgenev drew it; it is luminous in Madame Nazimova's acting.[87]

Arthur Pollack also called Nazimova's performance lovely, but in addition, he agreed with Krutch that Nazimova's performance as Natalia was her best work in years. He stated:

> She is a better actress at the moment than she has seemed in many a long and weary year. . . . She

> knows her Turgenev, knows that his play is a placid play the emotions of which show themselves in undulations not in lumps, a calm comedy at once sunny and poignant. So she is a sweet woman with the best of impulses sharing power over her with softly predatory instincts. Hers is a lovely performance, really.[88]

With Natalia, therefore, Nazimova again pleased the critics by her sensitive portrayal of the "lovely" Russian woman whose changing moods were clearly conveyed to the audience through subtle movements which also managed to suggest an inner "sinister quality." Most of the reviews of Nazimova's work in A Month in the Country seem to be epitomized by Djuna Barnes of Theatre Guild Magazine who stated "To me she had been entirely and rightly splendid in one of splendor's many ways."[89]

Two noteworthy observations were made about Nazimova's performance in A Month in the Country. First, we are again reminded of Nazimova's slight Russian accent. Certainly it would seem appropriate to have a Russian accent when performing in a Russian play, but the other actors did not use accents and one reviewer had difficulty at first in understanding the lines the actress was saying.

> There was some difficulty at the beginning in understanding Nazimova, which clouded to a certain extent the earlier portion of the first act, but when she got into her stride she was superb. It is seldom, in fact, that one is given the opportunity to create such a wholly satisfying character as was evidenced, for instance, in her work in the second act. She spoke with her whole body, even her hands being the living expression of thought.[90]

For this Philadelphia reviewer, evidently Nazimova's performance was so magnificent that it overcame the problem he had with comprehension.

The second significant comment about Nazimova's performance in the Turgenev drama was made by Lawrence Langner in his book The Magic Curtain. Once again Langner indicated that Nazimova tended to vary her performance from evening to evening.

> She sometimes played the character of Natalia as a charming and delightful woman; at other times she would play her as a sulky and lovable creature, while another time she would make her positively mean and disagreeable and what was more extraordinary, whichever characterization she happened to choose on the particular night she was playing it, this characterization was completely consistent from the beginning to the end of the play.[91]

The director of A Month in the Country, Rouben Mamoulian, did not agree with Langner's statement that Nazimova made significant changes in her performance of Natalia. While he agreed that there may have been slight variations from evening to evening, he felt that the actress had too much skill and pride in her work to allow her to change the character extensively.[92]

A Month in the Country was the fourth Russian play in which Nazimova had appeared since her return to the stage with The Cherry Orchard. Many critics felt that as Natalia she had given her best performance for many years. In fact, while the play itself was not always well received, the production and Nazimova's

performance were accorded almost unanimous accolades. She had proved with the four performances that, as in her early career, she could achieve great success with European dramas because of her unusual ability to skillfully convey the inner feelings of the characters she portrayed. The Theatre Guild, Nazimova's newly found supporter, then offered the actress a role in an entirely different kind of play. The question was, would she be willing to venture forth into an American version of The Oresteia, written by Eugene O'Neill.

Mourning Becomes Electra.--In 1931 the Lunts starred in Reunion in Vienna, Katherine Cornell won plaudits as Elizabeth Barrett in The Barretts of Wimpole Street, and Noel Coward appeared with Gertrude Lawrence in Private Lives. Fortunately, however, the Theatre Guild also presented Eugene O'Neill's trilogy Mourning Becomes Electra for those members of the New York theatre-going public who preferred serious American drama. The play opened at the Guild Theatre on October 27, 1935. The memorable production, directed by Philip Moeller with costumes and settings by Robert Edmond Jones, was ably performed by a splendid cast which included Alice Brady, Earle Larrimore, Lee Barker and Thomas Chalmers. Nazimova, who had elected to perform in her first American drama since returning to the legitimate stage in 1928, played the pivotal role of Christine.

Most critics reckoned that the six hours that the production forced the play goer to spend in the theatre were well worth the effort. Roy Waldau, in his book The Vintage Years of the Theatre Guild, describes the impact of the production.

> Briefly, nearly everything about Electra's production was termed a triumph by the New York critics: Robert Edmond Jones' atmospheric settings, Moeller's perceptive direction, and especially the splendid performances of Miss Nazimova and Alice Brady as the fate bedeviled Mannon women, all received press ovations which were like cooling draughts after a long dry spell to the masterpiece's producers.[93]

O'Neill's adaptation of The Oresteia won its most frequent praise for Alla Nazimova and Alice Brady in their roles as mother and daughter. As in Waldau's book, a surprising number of critics gave their accolades primarily to the pair of fine performances. Brooks Atkinson, in a long, perceptive review of the play states, "It is played by Alice Brady and Madame Nazimova with consumate artistry and passion."[94] Ward Morehouse told the same story: "It was played with unerring skill and insight by Alice Brady, . . . [and] Alla Nazimova,"[95] although he did add a compliment to Earle Larrimore who played Orin Mannon.

Stirling Bowen's detailed review of Mourning Becomes Electra pointed out that there were more than just superficial resemblances between the work of the two leading actresses in the drama.

> Christine and Lavinia Mannon may ber murderous, wanton and unnatural. But Miss Brady and Madame Nazimova have not neglected to give them a peculiar kind of beauty. In the pitch of their voices, their graceful manipulation of studied costumes and in all their posturing, the two actresses repeatedly safeguard Mr. O'Neill's leading characters, and the whole play from falling into a routine of the grotesque.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The actresses understand their own faculties as well as the external problems at hand, and the results are consistently fine, as often in moments of stillness as in those of furor.[96]

In fact, with the possible exception of critical response to the fine work of Eva Le Gallienne as Varya in The Cherry Orchard, Mourning Becomes Electra is the only play Nazimova ever appeared in which had another actress performing whose work was favorably compared with hers. Certainly critical acclaim makes it clear that in Christine Mannon Nazimova had found one of the finest roles of her career. Since Alice Brady was also giving one of the finest performances of her career, the O'Neill drama was doubly enhanced.

O'Neill himself was particularly fascinated by the characterizations created by Nazimova and Alice Brady. He watched them develop as the rehearsals progressed, and to his surprise they were not the same women he felt he had brought into being.

> "He also became aware that they were less and less what he had written," Carlotta [Mrs. O'Neill] added. "They were so wonderful, from their point of view, that they did not harm the play--but they were not what Gene had fancied. For instance, Alice who was Irish and French, was playing a New England woman--

> a thing that disturbed him." (Much later O'Neill told an interviewer, "Alice Brady and Alla Nazimova gave wonderful performances in Mourning Becomes Electra, but they did not carry out my conception at all. I saw a different play from the one I had written. . . .)[97]

Individually, Nazimova was commended for the remarkably sinister quality which she brought to her characterization of Christine. Even Henry Murdock, who was not particularly fond of the long drama, praised the actress for sustaining his interest in the play.

> Alla Nazimova was little short of superb as the sinning Christine. When chills and blood-curdling events were required, she supplied them with all her vast emotional powers. The part was pretty much that of a female Dracula--but the artistry of this gifted Russian served the playwright better than he should have hoped.[98]

A similar report can be found in John Hutchen's review of the drama. He stated, "Alla Nazimova's Christine is a sinister and deeply realized creation."[99] The word sinister was also applied by Brooks Atkinson and John Mason Brown. Atkinson "admired " . . . the preternatural grace of Madame Nazimova's Christine, which is one of the loveliest and most sinister character studies I ever saw."[100] Brown's report was equally laudative. "Alla Nazimova's Christine is superbly sinister, possessed of an insidious and electric malevolence, and brilliant with incandescent fire."[101] Nazimova's performance may have been "sinister," but it was praised by all who saw it. Katherine Roberts of Collier's felt that it was "without question the finest performance of the season."[102]

The many adjectives used by critics in their attempt to communicate the power and impact of Nazimova's performance as Christine give the reader an understanding of the way the actress portrayed the role. Besides the creation of a "sinister" woman, several critics suggest that Nazimova also managed to create in the audience "pity for the woman in alien surroundings driven to terrible deeds by forces she had not the strength to resist."[103] Lawrence Langner appears to concur with this evaluation of Nazimova's performance. He states that her ability to "arouse the sympathy of the audience made one almost forgive her the murder of her husband, General Ezra Mannon, while hating her for doing it."[104]

Besides the sinister quality and the sense of compassion she aroused, Nazimova was frequently cited for the grace and beauty of the character she created. Atkinson described her portrayal as "a performance of haunting beauty, . . . plastic, eloquent and imaginatively transcendent."[105] In addition, Gagey remarked upon her "tragic loveliness,"[106] Bowen stated that Nazimova gave Christine a "peculiar kind of beauty,"[107] and Langner mentioned her "feminine allure."[108]

Nazimova's portrayal of Christine was also praised for the various performing skills she displayed. Murdock credited her with "vast emotional powers,"[109] and Hutchens complimented the actress's "technical

resourcefulness" and stated that she responded "flawlessly to the role through which the themes of the trilogy run most fiercely during the first two plays."[110] Atkinson praised the "variety" she found in the role,[111] Ward Morehouse noted her "insight,"[112] while Stirling Bowen stated that both Alice Brady and Nazimova were able to "understand their own faculties as well as the external problems at hand, and the results are consistently fine, as often in moments of stillness as in those of furore."[113] Taking the statements listed above into consideration, plus the reports in reviews of The Cherry Orchard, Katerina and A Month in the Country that one of Nazimova's greatest skills lay in her ability to communicate the inner feelings of a character, it seems possible to comprehend why Nazimova's performance in Mourning Becomes Electra was so effective.

A familiar note in reviews of a Nazimova production was sounded by Robert Benchley, writing for the New Yorker in November, 1931. Once again the actress's voice was reported inappropriate for the part she was playing, although the critic did feel that Nazimova's overall performance was excellent. He stated: "Nazimova, in spite of her Russian accent which rings so strangely in Suffolk county, made so much of the sinning Clytemnestra that the drama lost much when she withdrew into the shades of the House of Mannon never to return."[114] The

actress herself told Lucius Beebe that she had found it difficult "to adapt to the common idiom of New England,"[115] but she must have been fairly successful because Benchley seems to be the only critic to complain of a Russian accent in a play set in New England.

Personal letters and newspaper articles corroborate the fact that Christine in Mourning Becomes Electra was the most difficult and tiring role that Nazimova ever played. The actress reported to Francine Markel:

> It made me feel that I was taking--sapping each audiences energy--rather than giving, and I always prefer to give. It was very tiring. I was exhausted when I finished it.[116]

Another newspaper article indicates that Nazimova had said that acting in the O'Neill play was "one long nightmare . . . you don't know how terrible, how exhausting."[117] Leona Scott, a friend of Nazimova, wrote a letter which describes the impact that performing in Mourning Becomes Electra had upon the actress.

> Truly, I believe Mourning Becomes Electra helped to weaken her vitality. Even the clothes she wore in that awful play were a burden to her. If you remember when it was in Philadelphia there was, too, an unusual heat wave and that increased her discomfort. She never complained except of tiredness.[118]

Although the role of Christine may have sapped Nazimova's energy, she admitted that it was a magnificent part. "I am grateful for the opportunity it gives me. It is like playing Bach or the most intricate fugue. You have a chance to show artistry."[119] The actress stated that in her performance she portrayed Christine

as if she achieved her power over men "from her mentality."[120] This is a particularly revealing comment in light of O'Neill's evident surprise at the way Nazimova and Alice Brady played their roles in his Mourning Becomes Electra.

It is difficult to find any unfavorable criticism of Nazimova's performance in Mourning Becomes Electra. What little can be found is overwhelmed by the evidence to the contrary. Most critics agreed with the statement that E. M. Gagey made in his book Revolution in American Drama:

> In fact, the Guild casting came as near as possible to perfection. The exotic and tragic loveliness of Christine was given life by Alla Nazimova in an unforgettable performance.[121]

One can only conclude that, as infrequently occurs, although the part was tiring, it and the actress were a perfect combination.

Mourning Becomes Electra was the first noteworthy American drama in which Nazimova appeared. Unfortunately, however, her next attempt at the genre did not prove as effective. In fact, it was the first time in the last phase of her career that she personally received unfavorable notices.

The Good Earth.--This play was the fifth full length drama which Nazimova appeared in on Broadway after her 1928 return to its theatres.[122] In The Cherry Orchard,

A Month in the Country and Mourning Becomes Electra the actress had received glowing reviews and the plays themselves had generally been well received. Katerina itself was frequently described as "dull," but most critics had applauded Nazimova's work in the Andreyev play. The Good Earth's reception was very similar to that of Katerina. The play itself was roundly castigated; however, for the first time since she returned to the legitimate stage, the actress herself was frequently censured for her performance, although the rebukes were by no means unanimous. Before Nazimova's career as a mature actress was over she would receive poor reviews for performances in several other plays; this first personal failure, nonetheless, must have been frustrating because the play had been eagerly anticipated.

Pearl Buck's novel The Good Earth was one of the most successful novels of its time, but critics agreed that the stage adaptation completely failed to capture the quality of the book. Both Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times and John Mason Brown of the Evening Post found fault with the novel's adaptation and staging. Atkinson remarked:

> . . . part of the novel's somber magic grows out of the Old Testament style of writing, and the basis of it is the peasant's passion for the land which cannot be represented on the stage. It is a novel of works and slow dramatic movement. The Davises have assembled a succession of inconclusive scenes.
> . . . . . .

> But precious little of the novel's spirit has been preserved. Characters who were inarticulate in a novel must speak with some fullness if you are to have a play at all. Events of a long, arduous lifetime must be rudely telescoped. And mental attitudes that could be objectively described as shadows against a Chinese landscape in the novel must be discarded or put into literal speech. For the stage has neither time nor space, although time and space and a sturdy grace of writing are the essence of the novel.[123]

The following quote from the Evening Post makes it clear that Brown was even more adamantly against the Davis's play than Atkinson. He particularly disliked Lee Simonson's setting.

> Dragged indoors; played by white actors with English accents and occidental hearts, who wear pigtails and Chinese costumes; set before a wrinkled cyclorama that is supposed to represent the sky, and acting in rice fields that are about as luxuriant as a gangster's beard. The Good Earth does little more than demonstrate the limitations of the medium.
>
> It is not the theatre's fault that this is so. It is the fault of those who persist in using it unwisely; who are blind enough to confuse two radically different mediums of expression and who refuse to learn that the better a novel is as a novel the worse it is apt to be as a play.[124]

Although Atkinson and Brown devoted much space in their columns to rejecting the play and the settings, they found enough space to note that they were also singularly unimpressed with Madame Alla Nazimova's performance in the leading role of the peasant woman, O'lan. Atkinson found that Nazimova's performance in the early scenes demonstrated a good understanding of the character,[125] but he was unable to find anything commendatory about her work in the second half of the play. "In the later

half of the play her acting subsides into torturesome grimaces and her speaking becomes a series of primordial sounds."[126] This vocal criticism of Nazimova was reiterated by Percy Hammond of the Herald Tribune who stated in his unfavorable review: "But she seems to me to growl rather than speak, employing the utterances of an animal rather than a slave."[127]

The general critical disfavor accorded the play is described by Roy Waldau in his book The Vintage Years of the Theatre Guild, 1928-1939. Disclosing that the dramatic version of the famous novel only ran for seven weeks in New York City, Waldau adds: "It was a miracle that it ran that long; it probably would not have done so if movie money had not been backing it."[128] This same book affords a possible insight into one of the reasons for the critical failure of the production of The Good Earth. Waldau indicates that the Theatre Guild believed that Nazimova had not given a satisfactory opening night performance.

> The Guild's after-the-event apologia for The Good Earth's capital if grim example of good intentions gone awry, stated: "This play met with one of those fatalities that sometimes overtake an opening night. Nazimova, in her nervousness, slowed up her performance and added nearly twenty minutes to the playing time. The play never recovered from the newspaper notices the next morning."[129]

Not all the critics disliked The Good Earth and Nazimova's endeavors as O'lan. Katherine Roberts of Collier's generally approved of the play and the

performance. The journalist felt that the novel was enhanced by the play and particularly by Nazimova's performance.

> No longer is the impassive Chinese woman bound within the covers of a book that won a prize, and those who met her there, until they see her incarnate on the stage, can only repeat the line of Wang, who looks upon his wife and says: "How much of you I do not know!"
>
> Nazimova, who is beautiful, plays O'lan who the book describes as ugly . . . and somehow she so forgets herself and is so completely the person of O'lan that the description fits, and the enigmatic face becomes a mask through which occasionally flashes of the deep richness that is the inner being of the good earth-woman come with sudden swiftness and are gone again, leaving the exciting knowledge of how much lies behind its immobility.[130]

Perhaps Nazimova did give a poor performance on opening night. Katherine Roberts was writing two months after the play opened, and the Philadelphia critics, who saw the play in preview, frequently praised the actress's work, although they, too, usually did not compliment the playwrights.

The Philadelphia critics expressed particular approbation for Nazimova's characterization. The review by Arthur Waters of the Public Ledger included the following favorable statement: "Madame Nazimova's characterization of O'lan is as perfect an example of 'playing down' and smoldering repression . . . as Philadelphia has seen in years."[131] Waters agreed with Brooks Atkinson, however, and remarked that the actress did not perform as effectively in the later scenes of the play.

Another Philadelphia based reviewer noted that Nazimova's acting style was especially right for The Good Earth.

> To the role of a drudge Nazimova brings all that dark and brooding passion that she has worn for so many years as her own particular mantle of illusion, and which in The Good Earth fits her perhaps even better than any of her previous roles. The whole thing is cut to this sensitive actress's measure. She alone of the entire cast never seems out of place; not a word, not a gesture, not even a posture, but seems exactly right, until the playgoer, watching her without tiring is transported to that burning plain with the withered grain, and the farmers gasping for water before the parched stalks. As tragic a bit of realism as has been seen in Philadelphia.[132]

Owing to the marked discrepancy between the responses of the viewers of The Good Earth, it is difficult to describe precisely the way Nazimova portrayed the role of O'lan. The actress had already proved, however, that one of her greatest skills lay in her ability to communicate to the audience the inner feelings of her characters. She did this again as O'lan. In addition many critics noted that the woman Nazimova created was believable and appealing. "In movement, in gesture and in attitude throughout, the actress compels sympathy and wins admiration, so sincerely does she enter into the character and with such depth of feeling does she animate it."[133]

In contrast, however, several facts can be established which may account for the many unfavorable reviews received by the actress. Once again Nazimova was performing in an ineffective drama. In earlier years performing

in poor plays usually encouraged Nazimova to employ mannerisms to communicate the character. It is possible that Nazimova used mannerisms in The Good Earth. Atkinson did describe her "torturesome grimaces."[134] Secondly, Nazimova had always been most successful at portraying women who came from middle or upper class European families. O'lan was a Chinese peasant woman and it may have been difficult for Nazimova to identify with her. She has been described as an "intuitive actress"[135] and perhaps her intuitions were not attuned to O'lan. A third problem is suggested by the fact that, once again, Nazimova was described as "giving a performance which varies with mercurial rapidity from night to night,"[136] demonstrating that throughout the run of the play Nazimova was searching for an effective way to communicate the character.

Although neither the play nor Nazimova's performance received exceedingly favorable critical response, portraying the role of O'lan was evidently very satisfying to the actress. The Herald Tribune reported: "O'lan is the most satisfactory role of her career. Other roles had intellectual appeal, this had emotional appeal."[137] Illuminating this statement is additional insight which is found in Morton Eustis's book Players at Work.

> Perhaps the pleasantest role Nazimova ever played was O'lan in the Theatre Guild's The Good Earth. She loved that part because it was the antithesis of any

> she had played before--"something square, with no kinks, all white, clear and simple; no psychoses."[138]

In Eva Le Gallienne's book With a Quiet Heart it is reported that Nazimova told Miss Le Gallienne that the director of The Good Earth, Philip Moeller, arrived at the first rehearsal of the play never having read the script. "The result was confusion."[139] Le Gallienne reported that she had the same experience with Moeller when working on Prelude to Exile. This report may shed some light on the continual references to Nazimova's evident difficulty in working with some directors. Since the actress always arrived at the first rehearsal with her part well prepared,[140] a director who was lax in his ground work might have found Nazimova an actress who scorned the ideas he developed as the rehearsals progressed.

One curious adjunct to the commentary on Nazimova's performance as O'lan in the play The Good Earth is found in a letter written to the New York Times by a Chinese student. Richard H. Wang generally disliked the play because it was too far removed from Chinese life, although he admitted he did not object to the book. He found the acting in the play particularly disappointing.

> The acting appeared like a burlesque show. They did everything they pleased. Almost everyone overacted, even their voices. . . . The heroine acted as though she was not a human being, and furthermore, could not be an animal either; maybe a ghost, yes a

> ghost. . . . Her voice was too old and too hoarse.
> . . . . . .
> I wish I had not seen the play.[141]

Waldau absolved the Guild of their responsibility for the failure by stating that The Good Earth was the first of the sequence of plays that the Theatre Guild sponsored primarily for movie use.[142] With the play, Nazimova, once again, had received captious comments about her performance in an American drama, although the critiques had not been unmitigatedly severe. She never appeared in another American play. In fact, Nazimova never appeared in another successful play under the auspices of the Theatre Guild. Her association with them, however, inspired the presentation of Ibsen's Ghosts, which proved to be one of her finest critical successes.

An Independent Production: Ghosts

Ghosts opened on Broadway on December 12, 1935. Nazimova's fine performance as Mrs. Alving received excellent reviews from most of the critics who saw the play in New York and elsewhere. The actress was facing stiff competition that year, or she may well have won the Drama League award for her performance. The competition included Helen Hayes in Victoria Regina, the Lunts in Taming of the Shrew, Leslie Howard in A Petrified Forest, as well as productions of Winterset with Burgess Meredith and Awake and Sing with Luther Adler. The year 1935 was memorable for the American theatre and it was

considerably enhanced by the magic of Nazimova's performance in Ghosts.

Many critics felt that Ibsen's Ghosts was not a particularly relevant drama in 1935. The excellence of Nazimova's production, however, managed to overcome the objections of the critics who felt that the play was rather dated. The actress's particular triumph in effecting this is described by Edith Isaacs.

> The details of Ghosts are, it must be said, a little old-fashioned in 1935. What Nazimova does to the play--not only to her part in it--is to separate the temporary argument from the eternal, to take from the situation all of its elemental values and give us not so much Ibsen's Mrs. Alving as the woman of any age who finds her motherhood betrayed, and who comes before us at the moment when nature interferes to settle the account. Taken on that basis, Nazimova's performance is very nearly perfect, full of variety, showing a hundred angles of her character, fluid and steadily mounting in strength and in suffering. It is a performance to be grateful for.[143]

Nazimova's success at making a rather "dated" play appear to be contemporary may be clarified by the statements she made at the time. She believed that "the true ghosts of the play are a whole legion of outmoded and absolute beliefs and ideals."[144] Nazimova told Michel Mok of the New York Post,

> I have my own ideas about Ghosts. It isn't a study in hereditary syphilis. It's a study in character--the character of Mrs. Alving. The boy's disease is merely a device. It's a device used by the playwright as the supreme test of a woman's soul.[145]

Brooks Atkinson's total agreement with Miss Isaacs is indicated by his review of the play which appeared on

December 13, 1935 in the New York Times.

> Probably Ibsen wrote Ghosts for Nazimova. Or if not for her specifically, at least for a great actress, which is the measure of her Mrs. Alving in the performance that reached the Empire last evening. "Great" is a word for sparing use; it paralyzes linotype machines toward midnight. But there is no other way to characterize a transcendent performance of a tragic role in a drama that is not especially pertinent now.[146]

Corroboration for Nazimova's achievement also came from Euphemia Wyatt in her obituary for Nazimova which appeared in Catholic World. Miss Wyatt remembered " . . . to what heights she rose in Ghosts when she embodied the suffering of all motherhood as she stood by Oswald."[147] Undoubtedly, therefore, one of Nazimova's accomplishments in her production of Ghosts was the creation of a Mrs. Alving who symbolized one of the tragedies inherent in motherhood, and, through so doing, made her play timely.

Since Nazimova directed Ghosts the reviews of the play give a rare opportunity to explore the noted actress's abilities as a director of herself and others. The success of the production makes it clear that her directing must have been reasonably effective. In fact, the reviews praise several separate facets of Nazimova's work. Brooks Atkinson commented that in her direction the actress had surrounded herself with players "who have caught the fire of her acting."[148] The reviewer from Cue Magazine particularized his description of the work of Nazimova's fellow actors as he depicted the

effectiveness of the scaled down movements used in the production.

> The company of players surrounding Madame Nazimova seems strange at first. You detect the muscle-bound school of acting in which the actor become completely rigid, mentally and physically, unbending from the iron suspense only long enough to speak, pick up a tea cup, or turn anguished eyes to an indifferent heaven. But soon the reticent acting and the sparse movement begins to have a significance beyond the abilities of the free and easy acting of today. As the play gathers momentum the slightest gesture becomes important. The directress and chief actress deserves endless plaudits for her presentation.[149]

This report is verified by Lucius Beebe who stated,

> Those who have seen Madame Nazimova's production in Boston and elsewhere report that it is remarkable for its natural coloquialisms in translation and for the subdued quality almost mounting to understatement in the performances of its principal players.[150]

The reviews of Ghosts also give an impression of the way Nazimova handled specific moments in the play. One critic, while enthusiastic about the overall production, was not positive that Nazimova's placement of Mrs. Alving in shadow at crucial moments in the action was entirely effective. The critic asked,

> Was it her device to place herself in deep shadows during the tense moments and to focus all attention on a lop-sided location almost within the left wing, rather than to utilize the more conventional stage arrangements? One suspects so. Provoking at first, the plan is seen to lend isolation and sinister power to these scenes.[151]

Sundry reviews give us insight into Nazimova's interpretation of the Ibsen drama, and particularly her graphic depiction of Mrs. Alving. Several critics were struck by Nazimova's unusual handling of the final moment

in the play. Burns Mantle noted that the actress ended the play as she turned away from Oswald when she could not find the drug, rather than going into the customary embrace between mother and son.[152] The end of the play was further elucidated in a letter to the New York Times Drama Editor dated December 18, 1935. The writer, Donald Tweedy, pointed out that the play Ghosts usually ends without the audience knowing whether or not Mrs. Alving will assent to Oswald's plea and kill her son. Tweedy described his interpretation of Nazimova's singular handling of that final moment.

> And in Ghosts as she now performs it Mrs. Alving takes the morphia from Oswald's breast pocket, wavers only for an agonized moment between "Yes" and "No," exclaims, with tremendous finality and decisive self-mastery, "Yes!"--and goes resolutely to the stricken Oswald as the curtain falls.

While some critics may have objected to Nazimova's evident alteration of Ibsen's intent, Tweedy believed that her interpretation enhanced the play. He continued,

> And as a result you go out of the theatre purged, as Aristotle said, through pity and terror, that being the function and purpose of tragedy. It looks as though Nazimova had a truer sense of the tragic than had the author himself.[153]

Most of the other comments about Nazimova's directing focus on her portrayal of Mrs. Alving. Especially emphasized is the technical skill she demonstrated in her performance. She evidently held the audience's attention with almost a magnetic force. Peter Stirling

stated:

> At the beginning of the evening she captures the attention of the audience by the perfection of her technique. As the play progresses she holds that attention by weaving a spell which comes close to mass hypnosis.[154]

John Anderson of the Evening Journal also emphasized the fascination of watching Nazimova perform.

> Madame Nazimova's performance is a show, a creative operation that is completely engrossing as she performs it. Her embodiment of Mrs. Alving is wrought with extraordinary cunning, with much personal persuasion and a continuity of interest which makes it dominate the stage even from the sidelines.

While Anderson found the performance piquant, he was not sure that the actress was validly interpreting Ibsen's play. He remarked:

> She never lets the interest waver from her own galvanizing obsession, and finds the scheme for her hypnotic playing in the notion that she is tranced in a ghost story, haunted by the spectres of heredity. She has a way of looking at the other characters and listening to them, as if they were echoes, a method which gives the play an uncanny and absorbing interest probably a little aside from Father Ibsen's intent.[155]

Nazimova had been similarly criticized in the first phase of her career on Broadway's stages.

Brooks Atkinson did not feel that Nazimova's production differed from Ibsen's intention. He called the play a "milk-and-gruel attack upon authority and pious idealism,"[156] but he felt that Nazimova's "inspired acting" easily overcame the faults of the drama. He joined other critics like Stirling and Anderson in praising her technical control of the role.

> No doubt she is a mistress of her craft. If you watch her closely and divorce your emotions from what you see, you will perhaps be aware of the skill with which she puts dramatic emphasis upon the lines in the tone of her voice and in the eloquent gestures of her hands, and you will perhaps perceive craft in the positions she has assigned to herself on the stage.[157]

In addition Atkinson, as well as many other critics who had seen the actress perform, paid hommage to Nazimova's effective communication of the two sides of Mrs. Alving. He stated.

> Physically she is a pale and fragile person who has bowed so long to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that she is all suppleness and submission. But beneath the mask there is pride that has never surrendered, mind that has not lost its edge nor humor, compassion that weeps for the sins of a careless world, and the quiet of a woman who has strength enough for suffering.[158]

In her book Backstage with Actors Helen Ormsbee describes a specific moment in Ghosts which vividly demonstrates Nazimova's evident ability to communicate the inner feelings of the characters she portrayed, a skill which had frequently been observed in previous productions.

> Her Mrs. Alving was a woman who had lived long with grief--she had not slipped into it like a coat. It was in the stoop of her shoulder, in the colorlessness of her voice. Except at one moment close to the end of the play, her emotion was never an outburst; it was just the frayed escaping edge of something she could not quite hold back. Thus when she spoke of the endowment she was giving for the orphanage as being the amount that had made Lieutenant Alving a good catch, she added, "It was my purchase money." And Mrs. Alving's mouth and chin betrayed her feelings in spite of her. In trying to keep

> the corners of her mouth from drawing down, her tongue stiffened so that she could scarcely shape the words.[159]

From the descriptions of Nazimova's work which were included in the many reviews written of Ghosts it seems possible to suggest some reasons for the remarkable effectiveness of the production and the performance given by the actress-director. Nazimova made the play meaningful to the 1935 audience by focusing on "a mother betrayed."[160] The mother she created was "warm, luminous and alive,"[161] and continually interesting to the audience because they were always aware of the two sides of Mrs. Alving, the serene exterior and the suffering interior. This duality was communicated by subtle and controlled gestures, vocal intonations, and carefully considered staging, all supported by Nazimova's technical control as a performer. In addition the play was made telling because of the slowly mounting tension created by Nazimova and her excellent supporting cast through the use of scaled down, but carefully selected gestures. In Ghosts Nazimova demonstrated mastery of both acting and directing.

The numerous articles written about Ghosts elucidate the actress's theatrical procedures in the later years of her career. Nazimova told a reporter on the Brooklyn Daily Eagle how she conducted the rehearsals for Ghosts. The revealing interview gives the reader an

idea of the way she worked to create the part of Mrs. Alving during the rehearsals for the play. The first rehearsals took place while the company was performing in The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles.

> We rehearsed for eight weeks. These were not rehearsals in the ordinary sense of the word as used by Equity. We never worked on the stage but sat around in each other's dressing rooms and in each other's homes reading and discussing the parts until we thought we understood them. In fact, I think any one of that group could now give a reading from memory of any of the parts so thoroughly did we dissect them. We practically psychoanalyzed each part until we knew the characters as if they were living persons. I believe that no actor can present a role until the character becomes a part of him, until he knows how it breathes and behaves not only in the play but in any situation imaginable.[162]

Further information about the Nazimova rehearsal technique comes from Harry Ellerbe, the Oswald of Ghosts.

> She had a tremendous sense of humor and of the absurd and this was employed at rehearsals no matter how tense the scenes.
>
> She loved to use anatomical references in directing a scene. They were never vulgar and often so subtle one could hardly believe she had said them. She used them she said as a short cut to achieving results,--especially from priggish or dull actors.[163]

Ellerbe, the Oswald who appeared in the Broadway production as well as most of the tour, particularly complimented Nazimova's work as a director. He remarked:

> It was in Boston on the vast stage of the Colonial Theatre, while rehearsing Ghosts that I learned more about the technique of acting from Madame Nazimova in four weeks than I had for the entire ten years of my career.[164]

Patricia Calver, who portrayed Regina in most of the tour of Ghosts, had an almost verbatim report to make.

> In the five months I have spent working with Nazimova I have learned more about the stage and acting than I have under any other director, actor or actress in two years.[165]

In addition, Ellerbe stated that working with Nazimova was the greatest experience he had in his life in the theatre.[166] Any director with years of experience would be pleased to receive such endorsements from the actors in their production. Undoubtedly Nazimova's dual responsibilities in Ghosts proved a fitting climax to a fine career in the theatre. Here are a few of the tributes paid the actress for her work in the play.

> Hers is an astonishing performance--warm, luminous and alive with those powers which find the theatre at its smoldering best.[167]

> Nazimova and Mrs. Alving I consider not only the greatest performance I've ever seen an actress give in the theatre, but also the most enthralling evening I've ever spent watching a play unfold.[168]

> The audience sat breathless before a performance by Nazimova and her company that is as near genius as I have ever seen in the theatre.[169]

Finally, from the conclusion to Brooks Atkinson's review in the New York Times which opened by stated that the performance was "great."

> . . . Nazimova has flooded the whole performance with the light of exalted acting. Although the pages of the script are stark enough, they reflect light, too, and gather brightness from the wisdom of the lady who is turning them.[190]

Nazimova's Mature Roles

Alla Nazimova came into focus as a mature performer when she returned to the legitimate stage in New York

City as Madame Ranevsky in Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard in 1928. With the possible exception of her impersonation of Hedda Gabler in 1936, the roles she portrayed from 1928 until her death in 1945 can all be classified as those of mature women. There were no more young romantics in her repertoire. The mature roles included the Russians, Madame Ranevsky in The Cherry Orchard, Katerina in the play of the same name, and Natalia in A Month in the Country; she played a Polish woman in Doctor Monica, a Czechoslovakian woman in The Mother, Norwegian women in Ghosts and Hedda Gabler, a Shavian priestess in The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles, a Chinese peasant in The Good Earth and the New England matriarch Christine in Mourning Becomes Electra. In addition to these mature roles, the five films Nazimova made in the early 1940s gave the actress three roles as mothers of Hollywood's leading male actors, plus two older character parts. In contrast, during her silent film career which had started when she was thirty-six, Nazimova had frequently played young girls and generally portrayed women no older than twenty-five; even though, as Bodeen pointed out, the camera and the lights had made her years inevitably visible to the audience.

The opportunity to play mature roles immediately returned Nazimova to critical benefation, which favor she generally retained throughout the remainder of her career.

The actress herself expressed profound relief when she finally began to consistently perform parts that she felt mentally and physically capable to enact.[171] Success in her later years enabled Nazimova to express amusement at the critical spectrum her career had spanned. She told Ward Morehouse, "My career? I go up and I go down."[172] Her last years in the theatre, however, could only be classified as part of the "up" phase of a forty year career on the American stage.

A few critics who had seen Nazimova when she first performed in 1906 saw her perform mature roles in the late 1920s and 1930s. Most of these reviewers felt that the actress had become a better performer in her later years. In a typical evaluation of Nazimova's career Helen Ormsbee stated:

> Her work in her first few seasons attracted wide attention--and yet it was not so deeply cut as it is now. What she had then was facility. Now she has nobleness. In the early period her costumes and make-up, as well as the tiny mannerisms of her parts were almost too cleverly designed. Soon she was enjoying a vogue for sinuous, languorous impersonations.
>
> Those things she put away years ago. Today she is the Nazimova who creates such characters as her Christine and Mrs. Alving in Ghosts. Trained under Stanislavsky, her acting always had the smaller fidelities to life, but years have added a touching humanity.[173]

Nazimova herself felt that one of the reasons her later performances were well accepted was because she had finally adjusted to the tempo of the age in which she was performing. In an interview she described the changes

she had made in Hedda Gabler. She contrasted the 1906 and 1936 productions of the Ibsen classic.

> Ibsen's Hedda is a poseur. In the early 1900s a woman posed physically. Today she poses mentally. I used to drape myself around the furniture, against the portieres. I gestured and struck attitudes. I spoke slowly because the women of that time spoke slowly. That was right for 1906. For 1936 it would be wrong. Today Hedda sits quietly in the chair or on the couch. The audience can see by her expressions or by her very stillness, that she is planning what to say--what pose she wishes to create. It is more effective than ranting and gasping at the back of the stage. She speaks more rapidly. No matter what the situation we consistently hurry. My present Hedda talks with her guests as I talk during an interview. She interacts instead of overacts. The tragedy becomes modern. It is not the theme that is altered; it is the manner in which the theme is acted.[174]

We may conclude that Nazimova's undoubted success in the final phase of her career in the theatre was caused by a combination of circumstances, some accidental and some created by the actress herself. First of all, the actress was the right age for most of the parts she was portraying. Secondly, out of the ten major roles she played, five were women created by successful European playwrights like Ibsen, Chekhov and Turgenev; she had always excelled at performing their characters. Thirdly, because Nazimova frequently portrayed well-written and rather pathological characters, she had few opportunities to indulge in the mannerisms and posing which had often surfaced earlier in her career when she played women of only one dimension in plays like Bella Donna. Fourthly, Nazimova's Russian accent, although still present, was

acceptable in many of her roles and evidently did not hamper audiences from understanding the actress as it had earlier in her career. Fifthly, during the final phase of her career, Nazimova often played opposite actors and actresses like Alice Brady and Eva Le Gallienne whose intensity matched hers and, therefore, balanced the productions. Finally, Nazimova realized that a play must appeal to the audience who is seeing it, so in plays like Hedda Gabler and Ghosts she managed to effectively suit the play to the time.

Nazimova believed "Next to life, work in the theatre is the greatest art."[175] She worked in the American theatre for forty years, but it is generally agreed that she did her best work during her last years on the stage.

Footnotes

[1]Alla Nazimova, "I Come Full Circle," Theatre Magazine, XLIX (April, 1928), 74.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Howard Hyman Taubman, The Making of the American Theatre (New York: Coward McCann, 1965), p. 165.

[4]Nazimova, "I Come Full Circle," op. cit., p. 74.

[5]Taubman, The Making of the American Theatre, op. cit., p. 165.

[6]Fitzroy Davis, "And Who Do You Think You Are?," unidentified newspaper clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[7]New York Times, January 15, 1929, 22:3.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, February 27, 1929, 30:3.

[11]Benjamin De Casseres, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[12]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, February 27, 1929, 30:3.

[13]Benjamin De Casseres, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[14]Arthur B. Waters, unidentified newspaper clipping from a Philadelphia newspaper, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[17]Wilfred J. Riley, unidentified newspaper clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Robert Littell, "Broadway in Review," Theatre Arts Monthly, XIII (May, 1929), p. 335.

[20]Heywood Broun, unidentified newspaper clipping, Nazimova file, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[21]New York Telegram, July 18, 1929, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[22]Roy S. Waldau, Vintage Years of the Theatre Guild, 1928-1939 (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University, 1972), p. 77.

[23]Stirling Bowen, unidentified newspaper clipping dated April, 1930, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[24]Henry T. Murdock, unidentified newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[25]In an interview with the author on June 21, 1973 Rouben Mamoulian stated that he was unable to comment upon the actress's comic ability since he had never seen her perform a comic role.

[26]Lawrence Langner, The Magic Curtain (New York: Dutton and Co., 1951), p. 256.

[27]Waldau, Vintage Years of the Theatre Guild, 1928-1939, op. cit., pp. 129-30.

[28]The only other American drama that Nazimova appeared in during these years was The Good Earth.

[29]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, October 18, 1932, 23:4.

[30]Waldau, Vintage Years of the Theatre Guild, 1928-1939, op. cit., p. 144.

[31]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, October 18, 1932, 23:4.

[32]John Mason Brown, Evening Post, November 9, 1933, 21:2.

[33]Joseph Wood Krutch, "Museum Piece," Nation, CXXXVII (November 22, 1933), 606.

[34]L. N., New York Times, November 7, 1933, 29:3.

[35]Edith J. R. Isaacs, "Broadway in Review," Theatre Arts Monthly, XVIII (January, 1934), 13.

[36]John Mason Brown, Evening Post, November 9, 1933, 21:2.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Variety, May 1, 1934, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[39]Percy Hammond, Herald Tribune (New York), February 19, 1935, 12:1.

[40]Waldau, Vintage Years of the Theatre Guild, 1928-1939, op. cit., p. 200.

[41]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, February 19, 1935, 27:5.

[42]Ibid.

[43]C. Hart Schaaf, Michigan Daily, May 28, 1935, 3:2.

[44]Lawrence Langner, G. B. S. and the Lunatic (New York: Atheneum, 1936), p. 152.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Theron Bamberger, "Nazimova goes a-trouping," Delineator, CXXVII (April, 1936), 65.

[47]"Gone but not Forgotten," unidentified magazine clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[48]Grenville Vernon, "Madame Nazimova as Hedda Gabler," Commonweal, XXV (November,27, 1936), 134.

[49]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, November 17, 1936, 34:4.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Unidentified newspaper clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[52]R. P. C., New York Times, undated newspaper clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[53]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, April 26, 1939, 26:2.

[54]Unidentified newspaper clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[55]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, April 26, 1939, 26:2.

[56]Unidentified newspaper clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[57]R. P. C., New York Times, undated newspaper clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[58]De Witt Bodeen, "Nazimova," Films in Review, XXIII (December, 1972), 601.

[59]Taubman, The Making of the American Theatre, op. cit., p. 359.

[60]Kappo Phelan, "Alla Nazimova," Commonweal, XLVIII (August, 1945), 83.

[61]Ibid.

[62]Alexander Kirkland, "The Woman from Yalta," Theatre Arts Monthly, XXXIII (December, 1949), 95.

[63]Taubman, The Making of the American Theatre, op. cit., p. 165.

[64]Ibid.

[65]New York Times, October 16, 1928, 28:5.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid.

[68]John Mason Brown, Dramatis Personae (New York: Viking Press, 1963), p. 10.

[69]New York Times, November 18, 1928, sec., IX, 1:2.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Taubman, The Making of the American Theatre, op. cit., p. 165.

[72]New York Times, October 16, 1928, 28:5.

[73]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, November 18, 1928, sec. IX, 1:2.

[74]J. S., unidentified newspaper clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[75]Phelan, "Alla Nazimova," op. cit., p. 83.

[76]In an interview with the author on June 21, 1973 Rouben Mamoulian stated that the actress had developed this reputation among theatre people in New York City.

[77]Rouben Mamoulian, private interview with the author, June 21, 1973.

[78]Ibid.

[79]Ibid. Blood and Sand is discussed in Chapter IV.

[80]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, March 18, 1930, 30:5.

[81]Rouben Mamoulian, private interview with the author, June 21, 1973.

[82]Unidentified newspaper clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[83]Henry T. Murdock, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[84]Unidentified newspaper clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[85]Alice Wildey, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[86]Joseph Wood Krutch, "Nosce Te Ipsum," Theatre Guild Magazine, VII (June, 1930), 49.

[87]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, March 18, 1930, 30:5.

[88]Arthur Pollack, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[89]Djuna Barnes, "Alla Nazimova, One of the Greatest of Living Actresses Talks of her Art," Theatre Guild Magazine, VIII (June, 1930), 34.

[90]Unidentified newspaper clipping from a Philadelphia newspaper, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[91]Lawrence Langner, The Magic Curtain (New York: Dutton and Co., 1951), p. 256.

[92]Rouben Mamoulian, private interview with the author, June 21, 1973.

[93]Waldau, The Vintage Years of the Theatre Guild, 1928-1939, op. cit., p. 128.

[94]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, October 27, 1931, 22:1.

[95]Ward Morehouse, Matinee Tomorrow (New York: McGraw Hill, 1949), p. 241.

[96]Stirling Bowen, unidentified newspaper clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[97]Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 748.

[98]Henry T. Murdock, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[99]John Hutchens, quoted in Rosamund Gilder, ed., Theatre Arts Anthology (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1950), p. 621.

[100]Brooks Atkinson, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[101]Brown, Dramatis Personae, op. cit., p. 57.

[102]Katherine Roberts, "Artists don't need Ruffles," Collier's, XC (December, 1932), 9.

[103]Euphemia Van Rensselaer Wyatt, "America's Loss," Catholic World, CLXII (October, 1945), 69.

[104]Langner, Magic Curtain, op. cit., p. 256.

[105]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, October 27, 1931, 22:1.

[106]Edmond M. Gagey, Revolution in American Drama (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), p. 61.

[107]Stirling Bowen, unidentified newspaper clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[108]Langner, Magic Curtain, op. cit., p. 256.

[109]Henry T. Murdock, unidentified clipping from a Philadelphia newspaper, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[110]Hutchens, quoted in Gilder, Theatre Arts Anthology, op. cit., p. 621.

[111]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, October 27, 1931, 22:1.

[112]Morehouse, Matinee Tomorrow, op. cit., p. 241.

[113]Stirling Bowen, unidentified newspaper clipping, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[114]Robert C. Benchley, "O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra," New Yorker, VII (November 7, 1931), 30.

[115]Lucius Beebe, Herald Tribune (New York), March 20, 1932, 21:2.

[116]Francine Markel, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[117]Laura Lee, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[118]Letter, Leone Scott to H. E. Vinyard, Jr., H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[119]Laura Lee, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[120]Lee Frank, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[121]Gagey, Revolution in American Drama, op. cit., p. 61.

[122]The Good Earth would be the sixth play Nazimova performed in since 1928 if you count the Chekhov one-act The High Road.

[123]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, October 18, 1932, 23:4.

[124]John Mason Brown, Evening Post (New York), October 17, 1932, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[125]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, October 23, 1932, sec. IX, 1:1.

[126]Ibid.

[127]Percy Hammond, Herald Tribune (New York), undated newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[128]Waldau, Vintage Years of the Theatre Guild, 1928-1939, op. cit., p. 146.

[129]Ibid.

[130]Roberts, "Artists don't need Ruffles," op. cit., p. 9.

[131]Arthur Waters, Public Ledger, September 20, 1932, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[132]Robert Reiss, unidentified newspaper clipping from a Philadelphia newspaper, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[133]Unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[134]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, October 18, 1932, 23:4.

[135]Both Rouben Mamoulian and Mervyn Le Roy used the word "intuitive" in describing the actress in personal interviews with the author.

[136]Unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[137]Herald Tribune (New York), November 27, 1932, 12:1.

[138]Morton Eustis, Players At Work (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1937), p. 97.

[139]Eva Le Gallienne, With a Quiet Heart (New York: Viking Press, 1953), p. 97.

[140]Rouben Mamoulian stated in an interview with the author on June 21, 1973 that Nazimova was extremely well prepared when she came to the first reading of A Month in the Country. Further corroboration can be found in the description of the actress's acting technique in the final section of Chapter II.

[141]Letter, Richard H. Wang to the Dramatic Editor of the New York Times, December 14, 1932, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[142]Waldau, Vintage Years of the Theatre Guild, 1928-1939, op. cit., p. 146.

[143]Edith J. Isaacs, "Nazimova in Ghosts," Theatre Arts Monthly, XX (February, 1936), 97-98.

[144]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, December 13, 1936, 30:6.

[145]Michel Mok, New York Post, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[146]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, December 13, 1935, 30:6.

[147]Wyatt, "America's Loss," op. cit., p. 69.

[148]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, December 13, 1935, 30:6.

[149]Cue Magazine (May 16, 1936), William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[150]Lucius Beebe, unidentified newspaper clipping, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[151]Allison Ind, Ann Arbor News, May 31, 1935, 3:2.

[152]Burns Mantle, unidentifed newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[153]Letter, Donald Tweedy to the Dramatic Editor of the New York Times, December 18, 1935, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[154]Peter Stirling, unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[155]John Anderson, Evening Journal (New York), December 13, 1935, 12:2.

[156]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, December 13, 1935, 30:6.

[157]Ibid.

[158]Ibid.

[159]Helen Ormsbee, Backstage with Actors (New York: Crowell, 1938), p. 254.

[160]Isaacs, "Nazimova in Ghosts," op. cit., p. 98.

[161]John Mason Brown, New York Post, May 12, 1936, 15:1.

[162]Daily Eagle (Brooklyn), January 12, 1936, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[163]Letter, Harry Ellerbe to the author, July 23, 1972.

[164]Ibid.

[165]Patricia Calver, quoted in an article by Jewel Wuerfel, Michigan Daily, May 28, 1935, 3:3.

[166]Letter, Harry Ellerbe to the author, July 23, 1972.

[167]John Mason Brown, New York Post, May 12, 1936, 15:1.

[168]De Witt Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 598.

[169]Robert Anderson, quoted in Ann Arbor News, May 30, 1935, 7:2.

[170]Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, December 13, 1935, 30:6.

[171]Alla Nazimova, "I Come Full Circle," Theatre Magazine, XLIX (April, 1938), 64.

[172]Ward Morehouse, Matinee Tomorrow, op. cit., p. 269.

[173]Ormsbee, Backstage with Actors, op. cit., pp. 253-54.

[174]Unidentified newspaper clipping, H. E. Vinyard, Jr. Collection, Library of Congress Film Department.

[175]Magda Frances West, "Nazimova's Views on Love, Husbands and Wicked Women," Green Book Magazine, IX (March, 1913), 417.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY

In November, 1910 a critic from the Seattle Star wrote,

> It seems that Nazimova is well in line of legitimate succession to their [Modjeska, Bernhardt, and Clara Morris] drooping mantles. She has their fiery intensity, she personifies the emotions superbly, she is dramatic in every fibre, and above all she has the sinuous grace of youth, and the full, rich speaking voice of youth. . . . Bear Nazimova in mind for the big things of the future.[1]

This study has attempted to describe in detail the big and small things in the career of the actress Alla Nazimova, particularly emphasizing her performances in the United States of America.

Nazimova completed her theatrical education in Russia. Starting out as a drama student at the Moscow Philharmonic Society Drama School, the aspiring actress studied there for three years under the eminent Russian theatrical visionary, Nemirovitch-Dantchenko. After graduating from the drama school with honors, the neophyte performer moved on to the Moscow Art Theatre where she spent one year playing minor roles and observing the revolutionary theatre at work under its two directors,

her former teacher, Nemirovitch-Dantchenko, and his associate, the brilliant Constantin Stanislavsky. Nazimova was formally associated with the Moscow Art Theatre for only one year, several years before the two directors formed a drama school. She was able, however, to see the productions at the famous theatre during the first two years of its existence. The productions she saw included the theatre's superb versions of Chekhov's The Sea Gull and Uncle Vanya. Even though it was several years before Nazimova came to the United States and started performing on its stages, her year at the Moscow Art Theatre gave her the distinction of being the first actress associated with Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre to appear on the stage in America.

Immediately following her dramatic training with practice in her art, Nazimova spent four years working in Russian stock companies. Each year she moved on to a more prominent theatre, ending up with a year at the Nemetti Theatre in St. Petersburg. The four years of experience working in theatrical stock companies gave the actress the opportunity to learn and to perform a great variety of roles; by the end of those years she began to find the time to apply her dramatic training and delve deeply into the characters she was portraying on the stage.

Nazimova spent the next two years of her theatrical career working with a company called the St. Petersburg Players. The group was headed by a talented Russian actor, Paul Orleneff, while Nazimova portrayed the principal women's roles. With Orleneff performing the principal male roles and managing the company, they traveled to Germany, England and finally the United States of America. The year 1905 and part of 1906 were spent touring America performing in Russian. Critical response to their productions was overwhelmingly favorable, but Orleneff's poor management led to financial failure for the group, and they were finally forced to return to Russia. Nazimova remained in the United States because she had been offered a contract by Lee Shubert in association with Henry Miller.

Nazimova's professional association with Paul Orleneff lasted for little more than two years. Many critics, however, feel that the undoubtedly fine actor reinforced and embellished the acting technique that Nazimova had developed during her years in drama school, her work at the Moscow Art Theatre, and her years in Russian stock companies. Orleneff emphasized both technical control and inner development of a role; he essayed unique interpretations of roles; he excelled at interpreting pathological characters; he was dedicated to the European theatrical classics; he performed with tremendous

intensity; and, finally, he demanded tireless work from himself and the actors around him.

By the time Nazimova started performing in English in America in 1906 she was a mature woman of twenty-seven and an experienced actress. Her acting theories, formulated during her work with Nemirovitch-Dantchenko and Stanislavsky, had been crystalized by the work she did with Paul Orleneff. She was an imaginative, intuitive performer who tried to see each character she portrayed as a living creature separate from herself. When the image was clear she worked objectively to adapt herself to it. The image was arrived at by an intensive study of the script. During rehearsal, and even performance, she continually searched for the right nuance so that every moment in the play would be meaningful to the audience. Nazimova's careful preparation of her characters generally resulted in the creation of unique, believable women who effectively communicated to the audience both the text and the sub-text of the play.

Under contract to Lee Shubert, Alla Nazimova learned English and made her English speaking debut on the American stage in Ibsen's Hedda Gabler on November 13, 1906. The actress's work was generally acclaimed as critics, accustomed to the rather ostentatious work of the actors of the period, praised Nazimova for a somewhat restrained performance which was particularly

effective in its communication of the inner feelings of Hedda. Some of the reviewers were less enthusiastic because they felt that Nazimova's interpretation of Hedda, although dramatically effective, made the character more pathological than Ibsen had intended. After her next performance as Nora in A Doll's House, however, Nazimova was cited not only as a star but as a harbinger of a new style of acting.

> At this point it became apparent to most critics that a revolution in the art of acting was beginning. For what seemed the first time in New York theatrical history, an actress had portrayed two entirely different people. To the astonishment of the reviewers, Nazimova had displayed a distinctly different personality in each of her Ibsen roles.[2]

Critics were equally impressed by Nazimova's next role, which was that of Hilda in The Master Builder.

There were several reasons for the undoubted impact that Nazimova's first performances had upon the theatre of New York City. First of all, Nazimova made herself appear totally different in each role she portrayed. Her Hedda was tall and languorous, her Nora small and kittenish and her Hilda "elf-like and mischeviously serious."[3] Secondly, as previously noted in descriptions of her Hedda, Nazimova undoubtedly had an unparalleled ability to communicate to an audience the innermost thoughts of the women she portrayed. These two factors made Nazimova's work particularly appealing to theatre goers accustomed to the "personality" actors

of the period.

The plays of Ibsen, although ideally suited to Nazimova's acting style, were not ideal as vehicles for the public to view the actress. Selecting her next role proved to be a conundrum to the actress and her managers. Between 1907 and 1917, therefore, she essayed several plays which were calculated to be appealing to the general public. The popular dramas selected included Comtesse Coquette in 1907; The Comet which occupied the actress during most of the year 1908; The Marrionettes which was performed in 1909; Bella Donna which proved immensely popular during a two-year tour in 1913 and 1914 and established Nazimova's reputation as an "exotic" actress; That Sort which was the 1914 vehicle and 'Ception Shoals which was played in 1917.

Popular dramas gave the vast audiences who were curious about the Russian performer a chance to view her, but the critics found the plays generally very disappointing.

> Her art which "expresses itself in a continual physical virtuosity which startles and thrills," does not find an outlet in the sort of play that English and American dramatists are likely to write; and as Mr. Ruhl points out, "of late she has drifted from her simpler beginnings and over accented the more exotic side of her personality as if determined to run it into the ground."[4]

In popular dramas with characters of little depth Nazimova still attempted to create unique women out of the

material the playwright had given her. Unfortunately, however, the women she created were so exaggerated that they were frequently unbelievable because of the posing, mannerisms and exotic dress Nazimova employed.

Twice during her first years on Broadway the actress returned to performing in Ibsen. In 1910 she did Little Eyolf; although the critics generally applauded her work as Rita Allmers, the public had seen Nazimova in lighter dramas, and the box office receipts demonstrated that they preferred to miss her Ibsen characterizations. Nazimova performed in Ibsen's plays again in 1918. This time it was in a season of Ibsen repertory, directed by Arthur Hopkins at the Plymouth Theatre. These performances, however, did not even receive the generally favorable critical reaction which Nazimova's previous Ibsen portrayals had accustomed her to expect. Critics frequently noted that the mannerisms the actress had developed while performing one-dimensional characters in Bella Donna and the like had carried over into her portraits of Ibsen's women in The Wild Duck, Hedda Gabler, and A Doll's House, considerably decreasing their impact.

Nazimova's career on the American stage which had begun with aplomb in 1906 seemed in danger of collapse by 1918. She had achieved stardom and critical favor and had developed an appreciative audience which was eager to see her perform. Over the years, however, it had become

increasingly clear that because of her Russian accent and her penchant for well-written serious drama she was difficult to cast. The unsuitable roles she was forced to play had encouraged the employment of mannerisms and posing, and the women she created could no longer be classified as "real." As early as 1912 a critic had written:

> Since November 1906 . . . she has displayed astonishing energy, but so much of this energy had been misdirected that she stands today in a position much less important than she is entitled to by every claim of native genius.[5]

This position was echoed by Djuna Barnes who, writing in Theatre Guild Magazine in 1930, saw the whole problem with a better perspective.

> She began playing that series of lust-and vengeance dramas which brought her nation-wide fame and grief, . . . sorry plays that besmirched rather than dimmed her genius.[6]

Undoubtedly, by 1918 Nazimova's career as an actress needed a buttress. Temporarily she found work in another medium.

A vaudeville production of an anti-war drama, War Brides, one of the five vaudeville productions Nazimova appeared in between 1914 and 1928, introduced the actress to a career in silent films. It was thought the short play would make an excellent movie, and it did. Spending most of her time in Hollywood between 1918 and 1925, Nazimova made sixteen other silent films after that first film version of War Brides.

In 1917 she signed a lucrative contract with Metro which made her one of the highest paid film stars of the time and also gave the actress effective control over her own films. Nazimova made eleven films for Metro. Some of her early films with the company, notably The Red Lantern, were considered good, but the more films she made at Metro the worse they were received by the public and the critics. Once again she was creating women who were too exaggerated to be believable. Her last film for Metro was an "arty" version of Camille with Nazimova's Camille aided by the Armand of a young Rudolph Valentino.

Although the Metro films were criticized, they made Nazimova famous and wealthy. Therefore, when she left Metro in 1921 she announced that she would finance her own film versions of classic dramas. Her first effort as a producer was a version of Ibsen's A Doll's House with Nazimova in the leading role. Although the film was not a financial success, the critics praised it and remarked that Nazimova seemed to be losing some of the unfortunate mannerisms she had displayed in her later films for Metro. Her second production was a film version of Oscar Wilde's Salome as designed by Natacha Rambova from the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley. This second "arty" film was strongly criticized, especially Nazimova's interpretation and portrayal of Salome as a

twelve year old girl. There was some positive criticism of the film, but it was a financial disaster, and Nazimova lost all the money she had invested in it.

Nazimova's silent film career, which lasted from 1916 to 1925, was generally conceded a failure by the artist herself as well as film historians. De Witt Bodeen stated,

> There is about her screen appearances a feeling of waste. She had a unique and superlative talent; she was a star of the first order--and yet the pictures in which she starred were, for the most part beneath her.[7]

The artist's contributions to the art of film in spite of her failure, include several good pictures, the establishment of the vogue for the mature "exotic" woman as a screen heroine, and the furtherance of film technique. Nazimova's demand that her films be made with technical skill and care proved to be a good influence on the rapidly growing industry.

The film career of Alla Nazimova was hindered by the problems which were to persist throughout her years in the public eye. The actress was difficult to cast. Although her Russian accent did not matter in silent films, it still proved difficult to find scripts that were suited to her dramatic talents. In addition, during her years in the film world she frequently selected roles that were wrong for the image she projected on the screen. Herbert Brenon, her first film director, stated it succinctly

enough.

> She was a great tragedienne, but she wanted to play sunbonnet roles like Mary Pickford. . . . She was great enough to specialize--but she wouldn't.[8]

When Mary Pickford roles failed, the strong willed Nazimova developed a "pretentious artiness,"[9] particularly evident in films like Camille and Salome, which audiences found ridiculous. The lack of a public eventually brought an end to her film career.

The final phase of Nazimova's career, which began in 1928 with her return to the legitimate stages of New York City in Eva Le Gallienne's production of The Cherry Orchard, could probably be considered the most consistently successful. The plays she appeared in did not always receive critical favor, but her performances were almost invariably applauded.

After her triumphant performance as Ranevsky in the Civic Repertory Theatre's production of The Cherry Orchard, the actress played the title role in the same company's production of Katerina. Once again her work was praised, even though the play was not particularly liked. Then began a fruitful association with the Theatre Guild, under who auspices Nazimova appeared in four productions between 1930 and 1935. Although The Good Earth and Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles were both classified as poor plays, Nazimova's acting in them did receive some good notices. The role of Natalia in A Month in the

Country brought excellent reviews again, but her real coup de théâtre with the Theatre Guild came in Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra. Although Nazimova found the role of Christine arduous to perform night after night, she was rewarded for her efforts with almost universal critical acclamation.

> She made us gasp with her portrayal in the O'Neill play. It was without question, the finest performance of the season.[10]

For many reviewers, however, the greatest triumph of Alla Nazimova's forty-year career in the theatre in the United States of America came with her 1935 version of Ghosts, which she directed and in which she portrayed the role of Mrs. Alving. Ghosts was the sixth Ibsen play she had performed in her adopted country. She had returned to the Ibsen who had made her famous thirty years before, and once again she had been rewarded for her sensitive understanding of his plays.

Ghosts was followed by another production of Hedda Gabler, the third of her American career. It was complimented, but not considered as effective as Ghosts. Nazimova's final performance on the American stage came in Karel Capek's play, The Mother. It was perhaps a fitting end to her career, because, as with so many other plays she had appeared in over the years, the playwright was criticized, but the actress was commended for her work.

In 1940 Nazimova again moved out to California and during the last five years of her life she made five sound films. In each film she played a fairly small role as a featured player, but in each film she was praised for her believable performance; the films were not all applauded, but she was.

During the final phase of Nazimova's career on the stage she achieved great reknown as a performer of mature roles. She was still limited by her slight Russian accent, her undoubted penchant for serious rather than comic drama, and the fact that it was always difficult to find a play she could perform in successfully which would also appeal to the general public. In her last years in the theatre, however, in addition to performing in Ibsen's work, Nazimova found dramas by Chekhov, Andreyev, Turgenev and O'Neill which proved satisfying to the actress as well as her audience. Although Nazimova had achieved fame in each phase of her career, it seems probable to assume that the final phase was the most rewarding for the artist and her audience.

> There has never been any doubt about the greatness of Alla Nazimova as an actress. I would not hesitate to name her the foremost actress of the twentieth century. Certainly, for what she brought to this country as a disciple of the realistic school of acting, she is a towering figure. She reformed and revitalized acting in America just as Eleanora Duse did throughout Europe.[11]

Some of the reasons for Nazimova's success in her last years on Broadway are clear. She was the right age

for her roles. She frequently portrayed rather "pathological" characters in serious plays by trenchant European playwrights like Ibsen and Chekhov. Her one real success outside of the mode was Mourning Becomes Electra, but even in that play she portrayed a "pathological" character in a serious play by an effective playwright. In her later years her accent was less noticeable than it had been, and, in addition, it was often suited to her roles. The actors she worked with were frequently skilled and talented, and their powerful performances balanced her own work. She adapted her acting and her interpretation of her plays to the audiences who would be seeing them, thus considerably enhancing their impact.

In addition to the reasons listed above, Nazimova, during the final phase of her career in the United States, retained the various skills, some learned and some intuitive, which had made her performances arresting, even when she was performing in Russian on the lower East Side of New York City in 1905. She was a hard working but also "intuitive" performer. When she performed complex women's roles her careful preparation, combined with her intuition, generally led to the creation of eminently believable characters. In fact, she worked to submerge her own personality in order to make her characters unique. She had an innate ability, frequently mentioned in reviews, to communicate the inner feelings of her

characters. Finally, her technical skill and control (presumably learned from her experiences with Nemirovitch-Dantchenko and Stanislavsky) enabled her to communicate adroitly the characters she created to the audience she commanded.

Nazimova's eminence as an actress was acclaimed throughout her career as she was continually compared with other prominent actresses such as Sarah Bernhardt, Helena Modjeska, Clara Morris, Koonen, Minnie Maddern Fiske, Eleanora Duse and others. In her obituary in the New York Times the following statement is made.

> For more than forty-five years Alla Nazimova was one of the most distinguished actresses of the stage and screen. She was one of the best exponents of the works of Ibsen and critics frequently compared her with such other famed Ibsen heroines as Emily Stephens, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Eleanora Duse, Nance O'Neill and Minnie Maddern Fiske.[12]

It seems plausible to suggest, along with Rouben Mamoulian,[13] that the most valid comparison can be made with Eleanora Duse. Mamoulian's opinion was shared by Gerhardt Hauptmann. In 1932, when the German playwright was leaving the United States, he compared Nazimova to the Italian actress remarking, "Not since Duse have I seen such acting!"[14] The following analysis of Duse's work, found in Brockett and Findlay's Century of Innovation, could be applied to Nazimova herself.

> But it was as Ibsen's heroines--Nora, Rebecca West, Hedda Gabler, Mrs. Alving, Ella Rentheim, and Ellida Wangel--that Duse's great powers were seen to best

> advantage. To all her characterizations she brought enormous psychological insight and the capacity to seem completely different in each role.[15]

Additional corroboration is found in Duerr's The Length and Depth of Acting. The historian states that Duse was "unequalled as she relived a role evening after evening, 'always with new and surprising variations, but always with the same essential line.'"[16] Nazimova was frequently alleged similarly to vary a role when she performed night after night. Finally, Nazimova, like Duse, introduced naturalistic acting to the country whose stages she graced. In 1938, during an interview for the Brookly Daily Eagle, Nazimova remarked, "Duse was really a pioneer of the modern school--the naturalistic school that has been adopted by the screen today."[17] She might well have been talking about herself. According to Clifford Ashby,

> On November 13, 1906, a slight, dark Russian girl with a bare grasp of the English language played Hedda Gabler at a Broadway matinee. The performance signalled the beginning of a theatrical revolution that was to culminate rapidly in the almost complete acceptance of the realistic mode of acting in America.[18]

Christine Edwards, author of The Stanislavsky Heritage, puts it this way.

> She is credited with having introduced to this country the Russian inspired acting of psychological realism which America was to see in full flower in the Moscow Art Theatre performances of 1923, 1924.[19]

Whether or not Nazimova can be validly compared

to Duse or any other actress does not seem vitally important. Early in her career she made a unique contribution to American theatre by introducing a new style of acting, but her impact on the theatre of the United States would be significant even without this credit. During a forty year career on the stages and screens of her adopted country Nazimova enriched the lives of theatre goers by her revealing interpretations of the complex women created by some of the foremost playwrights of the world. Even though, throughout her career, she was hampered by the difficulty of finding material suited to her dramatic talents and appealing to the general public, "so great was her appeal that for many years her name was virtually synonymous with great acting."[20]

Footnotes

[1]Seattle Star, November 14, 1910, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[2]Clifford C. Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLV (April, 1959), 185.

[3]Review, Theatre, VII (November, 1907), 288.

[4]Forrest Izard, Heroines of the Modern Stage (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1915), p. 358.

[5]Archie Bell, "Wanted, a Successful Play--Nazimova," Green Book Magazine, VII (March, 1912), 574.

[6]Djuna Barnes, "Alla Nazimova, One of the Greatest of Living Actresses Talks of Her Art," Theatre Guild Magazine, VII (June, 1930), 34.

[7]De Witt Bodeen, "Nazimova," Films in Review, XXIII (December, 1972), 577.

[8]Hugh Leamy, "Guiding the Stars," Collier's, IXX (October 8, 1972), 55.

[9]Alexander Walker, Stardom (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), p. 135.

[10]Katherine Roberts, "Artists don't need Ruffles," Collier's, XC (December 10, 1932), 9.

[11]Bodeen, "Nazimova," op. cit., p. 577.

[12]New York Times, July 14, 1945, William P. Halstead files, The University of Michigan Department of Speech Communication and Theatre.

[13]In an interview with the author on June 21, 1973 Rouben Mamoulian stated that Nazimova could be best compared with Eleanora Duse. He had seen both of them perform on the stage. Mervyn Le Roy, in an interview with the author on September 19, 1973, compared Nazimova with Bernhardt and Duse because of the power of her performances. He declined to be more specific in his comparison.

[14]Roberts, "Artists don't need Ruffles," op. cit., p. 9.

[15]Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, Century of Innovation (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 175.

[16]Edwin Duerr, The Length and Depth of Acting (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 390.

[17]Daily Eagle (Brooklyn), August 12, 1938, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, New York Public Library Theatre Collection.

[18]Ashby, "Alla Nazimova and the Advent of the New Acting in America," op. cit., p. 182.

[19]Christine Edwards, The Stanislavsky Heritage (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 215.

[20]Brockett and Findlay, Century of Innovation, op. cit., p. 228.

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