Master Builder

By Henrik Ibsen
Translated by David Edgar
Directed by Andrei Belgrader
Featuring John Turturro

Study Guide written by Nicole Kempskie
WELCOME to the Student Guide for The Master Builder, one of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen’s most significant plays. This production stars celebrated stage, film, and television actor John Turturro, known for his breakout performance in Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing. What follows in this guide are answers to some of the questions you may have about your upcoming trip to BAM, some historical background on the playwright, some ideas to think about when you see the production, and some fun and creative exercises that will help you appreciate the work you are going to see even more.

Let’s start with the questions you may have…

What is BAM?
BAM is the largest and oldest performing arts facility in Brooklyn, NY. Since its first performance in 1861, the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) has grown into a thriving urban arts center for global, national, and New York-based performing arts and film. The facilities at BAM include the Howard Gilman Opera House, the BAM Harvey Theater, BAM Fisher, and the BAM Rose Cinemas, a four-screen movie theatre.

What is The Master Builder about?
Written in 1892, The Master Builder tells the story of Halvard Solness, a middle-aged architect who has risen to the top of his field, but is overcome with guilt and doubt over the way he’s achieved his success. When a mysterious young woman appears at the Solness house and reignites his passion, drive, and vitality, Halvard Solness’s egoism leads him to risk everything in pursuit of his dreams. With its blend of realist and expressionist elements, psychologically complex characters, and resonant themes, The Master Builder provides a compelling entry point into the work of a playwright considered by many to be the father of modern drama.

How does The Master Builder relate to my life? What are some of the themes in The Master Builder?
At its core, The Master Builder examines what happens when ambition goes unchecked—something we see on a daily basis when we turn on the television. Whether it’s aspiring ladies trying to win the heart of one bachelor, cutthroat contestants vying for a chance to work for Donald Trump, or athletes losing their titles over steroid use, the drive to “win” and be the best is an ongoing theme in contemporary society. The beauty of live theater is that it provides us with an opportunity to examine important themes like this in the company of others. Chances are if you are a human being living in the 21st century, you’ve dealt with many of the issues the play addresses.

What should I expect from the performance?
You will see…

☐ A performance by an award-winning stage, film, and television actor.
☐ A production of a celebrated play that is gripping, moving, and haunting.
☐ A play that weaves elements of realist and expressionist drama.

You will experience…

☐ A play that asks us to examine our society’s addiction to success.
☐ A play that forces us to look at what happens when ambition goes unchecked.
☐ A play by one of the finest dramatic writers in history.

What’s inside this study guide?
Turn the page and you’ll see!
THE PLAY

CHARACTERS

Knut Brovik
A former architect who now works as an assistant to Solness; his health is failing, and it deteriorates rapidly throughout the course of the play.

Ragnar Brovik
The son of Knut who works as a draftsman to Solness; he has talent as an architect, but is afraid to stand up to Solness.

Kaja Fosli
Ragnar’s fiancé and Solness’s bookkeeper; she has fallen deeply in love with Solness.

Dr. Herdal
The family doctor and advisor.

Aline Solness
Solness’s wife; she is mentally and emotionally distraught over the death of her two sons and the fire that destroyed her parents’ home.

Halvard Solness
The master builder; a top architect who is driven, ambitious, and used to controlling those around him.

Hilde Wangel
A mysterious young woman who comes to stay with Solness and his wife; she is vibrant and passionate and reignites Solness’s drive for success and pleasure.
SYNOPSIS

ACT 1
The play begins in the workroom of master builder Halvard Solness, where his assistant, Knut Brovik, Knut’s son Ragnar, and Ragnar’s fiancée Kaja are busy at work. It appears that Knut is very ill and most likely doesn’t have much longer to live. Knowing this, Knut asks Solness to recognize his son’s abilities and let him head a new project that he has been designing drafts for. Solness refuses and is angered because Ragnar has secretly been drafting blueprints and the prospective client finds them new and modern. He confronts Kaja about this, accusing her of scheming along with Knut and Ragnar, and she denies any involvement. Instead, she admits to Solness that she has fallen deeply in love with him. Dr. Herdel, the family doctor, visits and informs Solness that Aline, Solness’s wife, suspects that Solness and Kaja are having an affair. Solness denies it, admitting only that Kaja has fallen in love with him. While the doctor and Solness are speaking, Hilde, a vibrant young woman appears at the door. She explains that Aline invited her to visit after the two met vacationing the previous summer. The doctor excuses himself and Hilde reminds Solness that they met ten years before when he built a church in her town. She describes an interaction they had at a celebratory dinner in which Solness kissed her, called her his princess, and promised he would come back for her in ten years and build her a kingdom. Solness is intrigued and invigorated by Hilde’s presence.

ACT 2
Later that day, Aline and Solness discuss Aline’s pervasive depression. He assures her that she will be happier when they move into the new house that he has built to replace her parents’ home, which has been lost in a fire. Aline refuses to believe that she will ever recover from the fire. When he is alone with Hilde, Solness confides in her and explains that after the fire, Aline was so despondent that she was unable to nurse their twin sons, and they died as a result. He also admits that he knew there was a crack in the chimney and did nothing about it. While the fire started in another part of the house, he believes that he willed the fire, knowing that he would have the opportunity to show his skills as an architect when rebuilding the house. He blames himself for their son’s deaths and Aline’s condition. Hilde convinces Solness to climb to the high tower of their new house and place the celebratory wreath on top, despite his fear of heights. Aline hears of this and is terrified for his safety.

ACT 3
That evening, Aline shares her painful story with Hilde and expresses that she would like to be friends with her. Hilde feels immensely guilty and tells Solness that she should leave, but as they continue to talk, her desire to have a kingdom and castle with a high tower gets the better of her. Solness promises her that he will give her just that, and that they will be together forever, and he heads up the scaffolding with the wreath. As Aline, Ragnar, Dr. Herdel, and a crowd of others watch a man rise above them with the wreath, they realize with terror that it is Solness. Hilde is ecstatic, and she waves Aline’s white shawl in the air with glee. Above them, Solness begins to waver on the scaffolding. He loses his footing and plummets to his death.
He who wishes to understand me, must know Norway. The magnificent, but severe, natural environment surrounding people up there in the north, the lonely, secluded life—the farms are miles apart—forces them to be unconcerned with others, to keep to their own. That is why they become introspective and serious, they brood and doubt—and they often lose faith. At home every other person is a philosopher! There, the long, dark, winters come with their thick fogs enveloping the houses—oh, how they long for the sun!”

—Henrik Ibsen

**CHALLENGE YOURSELF:**
Think about the quote from Ibsen above. How might the geography, climate, culture and politics of our homeland influence the way we write and what we choose to write about?

**The Early Years**
Henrik Ibsen was born on March 20, 1828, in Skien, Norway. His father, Knud, was a wealthy merchant who provided a comfortable life for Ibsen, his mother Marichen, and his sister. In 1834, Knud’s business failed and he lost his store. The family was thrust into poverty and Ibsen was eventually forced to leave school at the age fifteen and take a job as a pharmacist’s assistant. During this time, Ibsen immersed himself in literature and the arts, drawing, reading, and writing poetry to escape the humiliation his family suffered because of their financial debt. The wounds left from this experience would emerge in many of his plays, such as A Doll’s House and John Gabriel Borkman.

In 1846, Ibsen became involved with a servant ten years older than himself and fathered a child with her. While they did not marry, Ibsen supported the child for fourteen years, and the experience of fathering an illegitimate child would also surface in many of his plays later in life.

**Entry into the Theater**
In 1849, Ibsen wrote his first play, Catline, in verse, which would not be produced until years later. The following year, he moved to Christiania (now Oslo) to attend the university, but failed his entrance exams. Nevertheless, he continued to write and completed his second play, The Warrior’s Bow.

In 1851, he moved to Bergen to join the newly formed National Theatre. As part of the company he was required to write and stage a play each year and assist in a number of capacities (as a stage manager, costume designer, director, and business manager) for the other shows produced by the theater. He worked with the company for seven years and wrote plays in the melodramatic style popular at the time. While his plays were not well received by audiences, this full immersion in all aspects of the theater helped him fine-tune his writing skills.

In 1857, Ibsen became the artistic director of Christiana’s Norwegian Theater. Soon after, he met his wife Suzannah Thoresen and they married. They had a son, Sigurd, born in 1859. The Norwegian Theater went bankrupt in 1862, and in 1864, suffering from emotional and mental stress, Ibsen left Norway on a travel grant to Rome. He stayed abroad for the next 27 years and would write many of his most celebrated works far from his homeland.

**A Shift in Style**
In the late 1870s and early 1880s, Ibsen started to shift the way he wrote. He began to integrate elements from the realist movement that was occurring in literature and art. His new approach to writing and subject matter was centered around the relevant social problems of the day, and he began artfully crafting nuanced characters with complex psychological profiles that extended beyond the stage. This was a significant departure from the “well-made” melodramas that filled the stages up to this point. These new prose plays written by Ibsen (A Doll’s House, Ghosts, An Enemy of the People, and The Wild Duck) marked the beginning of modern drama and ushered in a new style of theater called realism.

By the time Ibsen wrote The Master Builder in 1892, he had returned to Norway and was considered to be one of the world’s leading dramatists. His last plays, among them The Master Builder, integrated elements of expressionism. After suffering from a series of strokes, Ibsen died on May 23, 1906, in Oslo, Norway.

**VERSE PLAYS**
Brand (1866)
Peer Gynt (1867)

**PROSE PLAYS**
A Doll’s House (1871)
The Pillars of Society (1877)
Ghosts (1881)
An Enemy of the People (1882)
The Wild Duck (1884)
Rosmersholm (1886)
The Lady from the Sea (1888)
Hedda Gabler (1891)
The Master Builder (1892)
Little Eyolf (1894)
John Gabriel Borkman (1896)
When We Dead Awaken (1899)
PART I: GETTING READY
What you will need: A copy of the play, materials for notetaking, the internet for doing research.
How to begin: First, you will need to create a collaborative team by finding three classmates to work with. Once you’ve formed your team, review the following four roles below:

1. The Actor: The person responsible for bringing the playwright’s character to life onstage during each performance.

2. The Director: The person who leads the creative team and works directly with the actors. The director decides and executes the staging, the casting, and works closely with the full creative team, overseeing the collaborative process and ensuring that the story and its themes are being fully realized through the many different artistic components.

3. The Costume Designer: The person responsible for envisioning and creating the look of each character by designing clothing and accessories that the actors will wear in performance.

4. The Scenic Designer: The person responsible for envisioning and creating the physical surroundings and visual aspects of a production—the scenery, furniture, props and other visual elements that create the environment of the play.

PART II: RESEARCH
Read the play in its entirety and then have each person in your group choose one of the roles above. According to your role, complete the following task:

1. The Actor: Choose a character from *The Master Builder* and compile a page of research notes about your character. Your notes should cover: your character’s personality traits, their significant relationships in the play, their worldview, and what they are like at the beginning of the play and how they change by the end. Also include some ideas about how your character walks, talks, and expresses himself physically.

2. The Director: Compile a page of research notes that examine: what you believe the meaning or message of the play to be, how you visualize the physical aspects of the play (set, costumes, actors), and why you think this play will matter to audiences today.

3. Costume Designer: Create a page of sketches and notes detailing specific costume ideas for at least three of the main characters. Use the internet to research fashion in the late 1800s.

4. Scenic Designer: Create a page of sketches and notes detailing ideas for the furniture, props, and scenic pieces in the play. Use the internet to research design styles in the late 1800s.

PART III: THE PRODUCTION MEETING
After the research segment of this activity has been completed, return to your group for a PRODUCTION MEETING. Each collaborator has 5 minutes to share their research findings and creative ideas with the group and address any questions the other collaborators have. Your team must then work together to come up with a cohesive approach to the play that integrates your research findings, and incorporates any new ideas that have come up in the meeting.

PART IV: THE FIRST REHEARSAL
Present a brief class presentation that provides an overview of your approach to the play, as if it were the first rehearsal for *The Master Builder*.

PART V: AT THE PERFORMANCE
1. Actor: Notice how the actor playing your character uses their body, voice, and emotions to bring the character to life.

2. Director: Notice how the director chose to stage the climactic ending of the play.

3. Costume Designer: Notice how the costumes help to delineate class, income, status, and how they express the personality and mood of the characters.

4. Scenic Designer: Notice if and how the set designer blended both the expressionist and realist elements in the design.
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BAM Education connects learning with creativity, engaging imagination by encouraging self-expression through in- and after-school arts education programming, workshops for students and teachers, school-time performances, and comprehensive school-break arts programs.

BAMfamily programming widens the lens of artistic discovery, offering young people and families smart, stimulating, and globally diverse dance, theater, storytelling, film, and music.

BAM Humanities is a forum for adventurous ideas, providing context for the cultural experience at BAM and beyond. Our artist talks, master classes, lecture and discussion series, and innovative literary programs facilitate engagement and discovery.

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