DEAR EDUCATOR

Welcome to the study guide for Henrik Ibsen’s classic play *The Master Builder*, directed by Andrei Belgrader and starring award-winning actor John Turturro (Do the Right Thing, Barton Fink, Quiz Show). At this performance your students will have the opportunity to see one of the Norwegian playwright’s most personal and significant works. 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 Halvard’s passion, drive, and vitality, his egoism leads him to risk it all to manifest her fantasy. 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.

YOUR VISIT TO BAM

The BAM program includes this study guide; a pre-performance workshop in your classroom led by a BAM teaching artist; and the performance on Thursday, May 30 (2 hrs 30 min).

The performance will be immediately followed by a post-show discussion (30—40 minutes). Please arrange for your students to stay and participate in this unique question-and-answer session.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Arts experiences resonate most strongly for students when themes and ideas from the film can be aligned to your current curriculum. This resource guide has been created to provide you with background information to help you prepare your students to see *The Master Builder*. Depending on your needs, you may choose to use certain sections that directly pertain to your curriculum, or use the guide in its entirety. We encourage you to photocopy and share pages of this guide with your students. In addition, at the end of this guide you will find suggested classroom activities, pre and post-visit screening questions, and links to resources that you can explore and implement before or after seeing the film.

The overall goals of this guide are to:

- Connect to your curriculum with standards-based information and activities;
- Reinforce and encourage your students to exercise their critical and analytical thinking skills; and,
- Provide you and your students with the necessary tools to have an engaging, educational, and inspiring experience at BAM.
Background

“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

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, Cateline, 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 Christiania’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)
Rorsesholm (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)

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY
As Ibsen says in the quote above, in order to understand him, one must understand Norway. Before your visit, have students write a short research report or present a short verbal report on one of the topics below, as it applies to Norway in the late 19th-century.

Geography
Politics
Class Structure
Literature
Music
Art
Religion
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.
Although *The Master Builder* was written in 1892, the themes Ibsen explored in the play couldn’t be more relevant today. What follows are the significant themes that run through the play and discussion questions to go with them. If you will be reading the play before your visit, it is encouraged to have students find additional quotes from the text that support these themes. All textual references are from Michael Meyer’s translation of the play.

### AMBITION & GUILT

“Mark my words, Hilde. Everything I have created, beautiful, secure and friendly—yes, and magnificent too. I must sit here and expiate [atone]. Pay for it. Not with money. But with human happiness. And not only with my happiness, but with the happiness of others, too. You see, Hilde! That’s the price that my success as an artist has cost me—and others. And every day I have to sit here and see that price paid for me—day after day after day!”

—Solness, Act 2

We learn early on, through his words and actions, that Solness has a ruthless drive to be the best in his field. With no training as an architect he has nevertheless managed to rise to top, cutting “the ground out from under” anyone who got in his way, as Ragnar asserts. He refuses to acknowledge Ragnar’s talent, even when it is Brovik’s last dying wish; he manipulates Kaja’s feelings for him for his own benefit; and he uses the tragic fire of his wife’s family home as an opportunity to show off his architectural skills. Simultaneously, he is plagued with guilt for the “trolls” and “demons” inside him that seem to drive him on in his pursuit of success.

- How would you describe Solness at the beginning of Act 1? What are your first impressions of him?
- How does Solness treat his workers? His wife?
- What does Solness confide to Dr. Herdel and Hilde about his ambitions?
- How does Hilde encourage Solness’s greatest aspirations and reinforce his deepest fears?
- How does this theme relate to Hilde?

### AGE VS YOUTH

“My luck will change. I know it. And I feel it will happen soon. Someone will stand up and demand: ‘Make way for me!’ And then all the others will storm away after him shaking their fists and shouting: ‘Make way! Make way!’ Just you wait, Doctor. One fine day, youth will come and bang on the door.”

—Solness, Act 1

Despite the fact that he is considered to be the “master builder” in the town, Solness is overcome with exaggerated insecurities about his age. He lives in fear of apprentices and younger men like Ragnar who he believes will replace him and force him into retirement. He has lost his passion for building. Yet once Hilde enters into his life with her youthful exuberance and vitality, he is reinvigorated and his ambition and passions get stirred again.

- Do you feel that Solness is justified in feeling so threatened by the younger generation?
- Do you believe Hilde’s story about how she first met Solness? Why or why not?
- Do you think that Solness believes it? Does that matter?
- How old do you think Hilde is?
- How old do you think Solness is?
- What consequences would they face if they ran off together?
REJUVINATION VS BARRENNESS

“You see, Aline had a talent for building, too...Children, Hilde. The souls of children...That was where her talent lay. And it lies there, unused—and unusable; waste and barren, like the charred ruins left after a fire.”

—Solness, Act 2

Solness’ wife, Aline, goes through her days in a perpetual state of mourning. She has lost her ancestral home in a fire, and due to the grief has also lost the twin sons she was incapable of nursing. She has become barren both physically and emotionally. Her days are spent dutifully fulfilling the needs of those around her, and she has lost the desire or ability to enjoy life. Solness, too, seems deadened by his wife’s despair, and the accompanying guilt he feels in relation to it—that is, until Hilde starts to build him up again.

☐ Do you think Aline’s depression is justified?

☐ Compare and contrast Aline with Hilde.

☐ What does Hilde bring out in Solness that Aline doesn’t?

☐ How do Aline, Hilde, and Solness each struggle with a balance between duty and desire?

SYMBOLS TO EXPLORE

towers, Aline’s dolls, fire, trolls, demons
Ibsen blends elements of REALISM and EXPRESSIONISM in The Master Builder. The following three activities can be used before or after the performance to explore these styles in the classroom.

Standards: CCR6-12 Reading 1-9; Writing 1-9; Speaking & Listening 1-6; Language 1-6; Blueprint: Making Connections, Making Theater, Theater Literacy

THE RISE OF REALISM
Prior to Ibsen, the most popular theatrical form in the 19th-century was melodrama. Melodrama was characterized by stereotypical characters, stilted and affected language, unmotivated plots twists and violence, and moral simplicity. In contrast, realism, or naturalism as it is sometimes called, dealt with the relevant social issues of the day and the ordinary people who struggled with them. The characters dressed, talked, and behaved in ways that would be recognizable to a middle class audience. Most of Ibsen's realistic plays were not well received when they were first presented. Audiences and critics found them shocking and offensive, and Ibsen's departure from the melodramas they were used to puzzled them. However, realism was slowly embraced and now it is the most predominant style on our stages today.

Discuss:
- What would be the equivalent of melodrama today on television or in film? (Soap operas, sitcoms, some reality shows, action films, etc.)
- What would be the equivalent of realism today on television or in film? (Dramas like Law & Order, films like Lincoln, Argo, etc.)
- What criteria can we use to differentiate the two?
- Which do you prefer, and why?
- What do you think the challenges are of writing in each style?

EXPLORING EXPRESSIONISM
“To see was the most important thing for both Ibsen and Munch—but certainly not in an external, photographically recording sense. The artist’s ability and task is to see inwards—so that external motifs and inner, mental agitation are ‘lived through’ (to use one of Ibsen’s favorite expressions) and melted together into valid expression.”

—Lars Raor Langslet, Ibsen and Munch

In addition to realism, The Master Builder blends elements of expressionism, a literary and artistic movement that was focused on dramatizing the inner depths of the human mind and soul. One of the best ways to understand expressionism is to look at paintings in that style. Ibsen’s writing served as one of the central sources of inspiration for Norwegian expressionist painter Edvard Munch, most remembered for his haunting painting, The Scream. It could also be said, since the two collaborated frequently, that Munch’s paintings inspired Ibsen’s latter exploration of expressionism in his plays.

Share the quote above with students and look at Munch’s paintings The Scream, Anxiety, Separation, and The Dance of Life. Discuss the ways both Munch’s paintings and Ibsen’s The Master Builder project the inner experience of humans in an external and abstract way.

REAL OR SURREAL?
Put students into pairs and have them work with their partner to discuss and rehearse the scene between Hilde and Solness at the end of Act 1, when Hilde first arrives. Tell one group of students that they are going to focus on the realist aspects of the scene, and should consider the following when working with their partners:
- What is the room like? How and when does my character sit, stand, and move around in the space?
- What is my clothing like? How does that affect the way I move?
- What do I want from the other character? (Their love, their belief in me, their attention, etc.)
- How do I feel at the beginning of the scene? The end? Why does that change and when?
- How much of what the other person says do I believe?

Tell the other pairs that they are going to focus on the expressionist aspects of the scene and are to imagine that the conversation between the two characters is actually a fantasy in Solness’ mind. Have them focus on the following when working with their partner:
- If this is a projection of Solness inner thoughts, how does that affect my character moves and talks?
- How might it change the meaning behind the words my character says?
- How does it affect my relationship to the other character? The way I physically relate to them?
- Are there other technical aspects that could be used to create this effect? (ie. music, innovative costuming, dance, lighting, etc.)

Have each pair present their scene to the class and compare and contrast the different versions.
AMBITION

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself
And falls on the other.
Shakespeare, Macbeth

Use the quote above as a prompt to discuss the pros and cons of ambition. Brainstorm examples of “unchecked” ambition in society today—in Hollywood, professional sports, the music industry, politics, and religion. Read Christopher Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus or Shakespeare’s Macbeth or Julius Caesar and have students write an essay comparing the protagonists in each with Solness.

Standards: CCR6-12 Reading 1-9; Writing 1-5; Speaking & Listening 1-6; Language 1-6; Blueprint: Making Connections

CHARACTER STUDY

The beauty of Ibsen’s writing is that he created complex characters with rich psychological profiles. The following activity can be done before the performance by using the script, or during and after the performance by watching the play. If you plan to read the play prior to your visit, have students choose a character and use the text to answer the list of questions below. If you do not plan to read the play, share the character descriptions on page three of this guide, have students choose one character to analyze while they are watching the play, and then have them answer the questions after the performance.

Name of character:
Age:
List five descriptive personality traits:
List five descriptive appearance traits:
What are your character’s dreams or wishes?
Who do they love?
Who do they hate?
What frightens them?
Who do they control?
Who are they controlled by?
What are they proud of?
What are they ashamed of?
What secrets about themselves do they keep?
If they were given three wishes, what would they wish for?
What class of society are they a part of?
What rules do they break? Why?
What troubles them the most?

 COMMON CORE

In addition to writing plays, Ibsen wrote hundreds of poems. The following poem was written over thirty years before he wrote The Master Builder, but one can easily find linked thematic elements. Many critics and scholars, even Ibsen himself, consider The Master Builder to be somewhat autobiographical, and architecture to be a metaphor for Ibsen’s career as an artist. After the performance, share Ibsen’s poem Building Plans with students, and do textual analysis to explore the metaphors, symbols, themes, and language that connect it to the play.

Building Plans (1858)
My memory’s as fresh as on the day that it occurred,
The night I saw the paper, my first rhyme, printed word.
I sat there in my lodging, with smoke surrounding me,
And puffed my pipe, indulging in blest complacency.
I humming away there reading, twenty times or more,
The paper which that day I found an interesting chore;
And my imagination was up to its old lark;
Ah, God! My inspiration’s still got some life and spark!
I built a castle in the air; the work went at a rate,
I set myself two targets, a small wing and a great;
The bigger one to harbor a man whose fame shan’t wane,
The small to serve a maiden, her very own domain.
It seemed to me the plan composed a happy harmony;
But later on confusion set in disastrously,
As soon as I grew wiser, the scheme just fell apart;
The big wing proved so little, the small engrossed my heart.

(Translated by John Northam, National Library of Norway: Ibsen Collection)

Standards: CCR6-12 Reading 1-9; Writing 1-5; Speaking & Listening 1-6; Language 1-6; Blueprint: Making Connections

BEHIND THE SCENES

See the Student Guide for a comprehensive research activity that involves students working collaboratively and taking on the roles of actor, director, scenic designer and costume designer.

Standards: CCR6-12 Reading 1-9; Writing 1-5; Speaking & Listening 1-6; Language 1-6; Blueprint: Theater Literacy, Making Theater, Making Connections
The mission of BAM Education & Humanities is to ignite imagination and ideas. Through programs that enrich the audience experience, spark conversation, and generate creative engagement, we turn the light on for curious minds.

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.

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