



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now](#)

THEATER REVIEW: Cast, crew's skill illuminates tale of despair

Play engages even as it treads path of darkness

By [Mark Hughes Cobb](#)

Staff Writer

Published: Thursday, February 25, 2016 at 10:00 p.m.

The dour Norwegians of Ibsenland do like to talk. Or perhaps need to: There's an urgency to all expressions. What is small talk?

But as those severe folks blow all their subtext out into text -- there's much boiling underneath -- the current production of "Ghosts" weaves a spell from those words: As much as one can for a 19th-century play drilling to the bedrock of 19th century morality, it pulls you in, takes you out of yourself and off to Ibsenland. That's due to a keenly crafted work by director Raines Carr, offering taut guidance for an A-plus team of actors, designers and tech folks. Garrett Walsh's off-centered set, aided by a warm, sensitive lighting design by Brandon Smith, builds sturdy bones surrounding dark openings, the cleverest thought a dining room partly obscured from the main living area, visibly in shadings, shadows and certain settings of light. What happens in the dining area stays, mostly, muffled, behind gauze, in the dining area. In the living room, confrontations cut sharply. The period costumes, by Chalise Ludlow, speak to us even if we don't get the literal translation, but hint instead who's tightly wound, who's freewheeling, who is apparently bound and yet at risk of coming apart.

In following the path back then and over there, it's easy to see why "Ghosts" shocked audiences for decades after creation, with its for-the-time frank discussions of incest, adultery and syphilis, not to mention dim views of religion, and defenses of casual sex.

"Ghosts'" original Danish title, "Gengangere," also could be translated as "ones who return" or "revenants." Despite those ominous sounds, it's a horror tale only in the seeming inability of its characters to break ties anchoring them to their past actions, demented families, askew societies. There are a few interesting parallels to Tennessee Williams' "A Glass Menagerie," which just ended a run at Theatre Tuscaloosa: emotional-societal repression, absent rogue fathers, domineering mothers teetering on the verge, children doomed and damaged irreparably by things mostly beyond their control. Also like that play, "Ghosts" begins with a surface gentility, but that cooks away without the redeeming decency of a gentleman caller, the haunted guilt of Tom. Credit Carr and crew with such skill and aplomb that the journey is fascinating, engaging even as it treads the path of despair.

New UA Department of Theatre and Dance faculty member Kelly Schoger masterfully plays -- it's tempting to say underplays, but that would suggest missed opportunities, and she misses none -- the mother, Helene Alving, such that the ribbed muscularity of her will, her wit might be capable of overcoming. It's a rare performance that both pulls an audience in while seemingly never calling attention to itself; a display of quiet, steely dominance overlaying hurt.

At the aesthetically near-opposite end is master of fine arts acting student William Green, playing ne'er-do-well con artist -- with emphasis on art as much as artifice --

Jakob Engstrad. There's a sly, lively energy rippling through Green, in this performance recalling a (slimmer, younger) Alfred Molina. Green's elemental power finds what comedy and charm there is in "Ghosts," and mines it beautifully. His fellow grad actor Zach Stolz, as Helene's sensitive painter son Oswald, veers cleverly between those opposing outward appearances, outlined with subtle restraint, but shaking with the heartbreak about to burst forth.

As religious patsy Pastor Manders, Ross Birdsong quivers on the edge of toppling forward, seemingly ill-at-ease even when the conversation's going his way ... for the moment. Unnerving at first, that teetering works for the playwright's intentions, suggesting a supposedly moral outlook built on shaky soil. And Sarah Grace Valleroy, as almost-salvageable Regina Engstrad, offers the most hopeful moments, brightest glimpses of what might be, should the sun ever return.

With such superior skill sets at work, it's easy to overlook the architect. But Carr has proven, in a short time here, a deft hand at crafting compelling art out of difficult material. That this look into the past seems neither hazy memory play, nor dusty artifact, but thrillingly of the moment, deserves note.

Copyright © 2016 TuscaloosaNews.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.