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Entertainment

## Play's layers of meaning resonate through the years

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Henrik Ibsen packs his play as one would carefully pack and bandage a deep wound. Outwardly, it appears polished. Underneath, familial struggles of deception and estrangement, and societal struggles of disease, morality and death, fester. As situations worsen, they aggravate, haunt. "Ghosts" forces audiences to examine the wounds that can't seem to go away.

"(Ibsen) kind of rips the scab off and presses everyone's finger in the nasty wound," said director Raines Carr. Carr, a second-year master of fine arts directing candidate, chose the play for the University of Alabama's theater season because of its continued relevancy. The Norwegian play from the 1880s opens Monday in the Allen Bales Theatre.

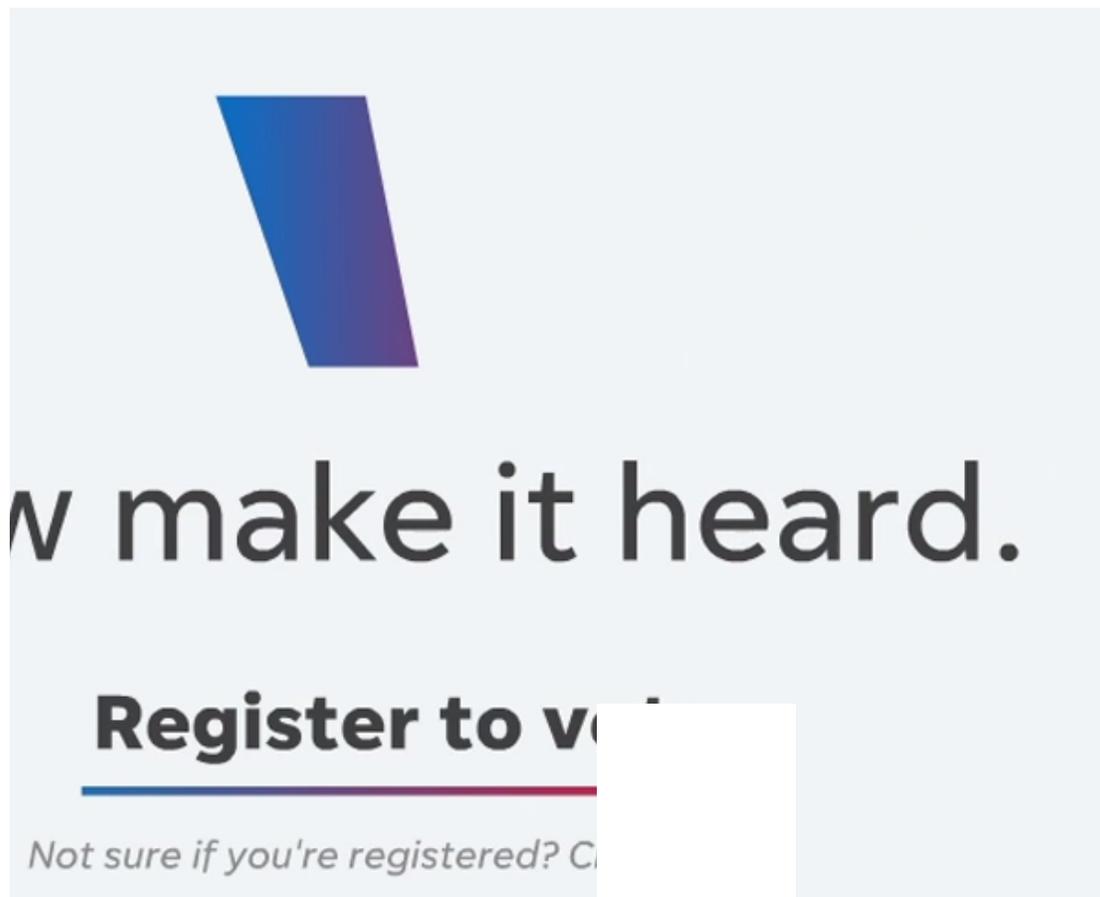
"The title 'Ghosts' refers to these things we keep, these things that linger," Carr said. "The actual translation is 'The Revenants,' or the ones who return. It's those old -- as Mrs. Alving in the play says -- obsolete beliefs and ideas that stick to us that we still subscribe to."

Mrs. Helene Alving (Kelly Schoger) speaks with Pastor Manders (Ross Birdsong) as she begins to reconcile with the 10th anniversary of the death of her husband Captain Alving, who left behind an immoral and unfaithful legacy. Their son Oswald (Zach Stolz) discovers he has inherited syphilis. He also must face tension in a romantic relationship with the house maid, Regina Engstand (Sarah Grace Valleroy), supposed daughter of carpenter Jacob Engstand (Billy Green).

“The conversations they have, even between an estranged mother and son, are the same conversations that you and I have with our parents,” Carr said. “Their situation is a little more dire than yours or mine may be, but it’s the same struggles of how do we communicate and how do we talk to each other? And in 1880 they had just as much trouble talking to each other as we do.”

The cast -- which includes a professor and undergraduate and graduate students -- often discussed the themes, relating these struggles to their lives.

“Just with the nature of the show and the content, we’ve had to be really open about issues in our lives and things that have led us to the point that we’re at today, that help us,” said Sarah Grace Valleroy, a sophomore majoring in musical theater.



At first, Valleroy didn’t see many similarities with her character, the maid, but has continued to find herself in Regina through the rehearsal process.

“At first I thought (Regina) was a little bit more unrelatable, but all she wants is a higher standing than she is now, and she doesn’t want to be a maid her entire life,” Valleroy said. “She definitely uses guys to get that, but back then, that’s kind

of all you could do, as a woman. The only prospect that we would have had would be to marry rich.”

Kelly Schoger, an assistant professor of acting and movement UA, has also found parallels between herself and Mrs. Alving, as well as links from the issues of the 1880s to today. Her character feels trapped in a home and marriage, and fails to stand up for herself. This is seen today, Schoger said, when “strong-willed” is used to describe a woman; the adjective often carries a negative, pushy connotation, she said.

“While there has been progress, there are so many things that Ibsen touches on in the play that are still -- maybe to a little bit lesser of a degree -- but are still being dealt with,” she said. “For example, the way in which Helene talks about how she trapped her own self -- she made the decision to stay in this horrible marriage, and she made the decision to tell all of these lies to build this house of cards that obviously crumbles -- still today, if women are ‘strong-willed,’ we’re still viewed in a certain way.”

Some names and words in the play have been changed to suit the Alabama ear, and make the Norwegian country town more universal than foreign, Carr said. But the themes should ring familiar.

“Ibsen is a father of realism who is influenced by melodrama,” Schoger said. “The end of each act, as we’ve been rehearsing it, we fight against the melodrama of the well-made play. So getting to the meat of it underneath it, the story underneath it, the relationships underneath it, the rawness of it, is what I hope what we will show. The rawness underneath it, and not the polished well-made play.”