

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

The Wild Duck

Henrik Ibsen, in a new version by David Eldridge
Donmar Warehouse
(2005)

While everyone else is cheering up their patrons with Christmas shows, Michael Grandage's mid-December offering is one of Ibsen's grimmer dramas.

The Wild Duck has been updated by David Eldridge, best known for his incredible success with the stage version of [Festen](#). There are similarities between the two plays, which may owe something to Mr Eldridge but probably far more to Ibsen's influence on the writers of the modern-day, psychological horror story.

Ibsen's work is always characteristic and it is often easy to draw parallels between characters and events in different plays. To pick just one, *The Wild Duck* has much in common with [Pillars of the Community](#), which is currently enjoying such success at the National, with its exploration of guilt and the slow processes by which hidden misdeeds will emerge, given long enough.

The play opens with a party to celebrate the reconciliation between distinguished Håkon Werle (William Gaunt looking rather like Father Christmas with flowing white hair and beard), and his son Gregers. The latter is played by Ben Daniels, giving a performance eerily reminiscent of his coldly malevolent part in the last play at the Donmar, [The God of Hell](#).

This pair is balanced by Peter Eyre's Old Ekdal and his son. The father is a weary, defeated old man who was implicated in a scandal for which the older Werle carried considerable responsibility. The pick of a good cast, Paul Hilton, plays the younger Ekdal, a photographer happily married to Michelle Fairley's Gina, but initially blissfully unaware of her financial and sexual secrets.

The joy and sadness of their life is Sinéad Matthews' 14 year-old daughter Hedvig. She is a sunny young girl who, like her grandfather, is desperately in love with a wild duck, rescued from the gun of old Werle. However, though she does not yet know it, the teenager has an inherited eye disorder that will render her blind before too long.

The drama really picks up after Gregers fights with his father and moves into the Ekdals' spare room. He has a commitment to truth which forces him, without a qualm, to reveal some home truths about his father that drive Ekdal into a frenzy of madness from which he and his family may never recover.

It is inevitable, as awful weather brews, that tragic consequences and further revelations will follow so that by the end, there can hardly be a dry eye in a house.

Michael Grandage tops off what has really been an excellent year both for him and the playwright, with a solid production of a relatively rarely performed Ibsen play. The cast all do their bit and Sinéad Matthews, whose speech patterns can be rather stilted, has a real talent for playing teenagers, as she recently demonstrated in Shaw's [You Never Can Tell](#).

This characteristically symbolic drama may not fill viewers with festive spirits but those who cannot face yet another pantomime might find *The Wild Duck* the perfect antidote.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)