

## CYNTHIA MACE in *GHOSTS*



Cynthia Mace as Mrs. Alving and Mark Thornton as Oswald Alving in *Ghosts*, written by Henrik Ibsen, running through March 5 at Studio Arena Theatre. Photo Credit: Jim Bush Photography

Cynthia Mace, who is starring as Mrs. Alving in the current production of the Ibsen classic, *Ghosts*, at Studio Arena Theatre, last worked at the theater nearly 20 years ago. Legendary Studio Arena publicist and historian Blossom Cohan recalls, "It was an English play; I remember her with an English accent." Indeed it was, confirms Mace. The show was a production of Michael Frayn's *Benefactors*.

Mace's resume is filled with English plays. She has, in fact, a great facility for doing accents. "When I was a student, I lived in Scotland with an extraordinary family. They became a permanent part of my life and had relations all over the UK. I know many accents, Liverpool, Northern English accents. They've been very good to me."

In fact, Mace's facility with accents helped her land the role of the Lynn Redgrave character in Redgrave's autobiographical play, *The Mandrake Root*.

"The play was based on her mother, the actress Rachel Kempson, and follows her life from the age of 20 to the age of 80. In it, I played 'Sally,' a character based on Lynn. Friends of hers from England who came to see us told her that they could not tell that I was not English. That made me very happy. Auditioning for Lynn was quite an experience. I was not intimidated, but I was very aware that I was auditioning for the playwright, to play

a character based on herself. It was a wonderful experience, and we were supposed to 'bring it in,' as they say, go to New York, but the producers delayed and then, after Lynn's mother died, she just moved on to other projects. She and I have become great friends."

Yes, it was when I saw Lynn Redgrave as Lady Bracknell in the Los Angeles production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* that I first learned of her connection to Cynthia Mace. "Are you going back to Buffalo?" asked Miss Redgrave of the venerable Redgrave acting dynasty. "You must speak to my good friend, Cynthia, who is playing Mrs. Alving there!" What could I say, but "Yes, Miss Redgrave?"

In *Ghosts*, Mace does not do an English accent. She uses her own voice for a new version of the play intended to sound natural to contemporary American ears.

"I have done very little Ibsen. I did do *Hedda Gabler* in Colorado. The rehearsal process is very fast and has been all about finding this woman. I've tried to explore everything about her in her corseted waist and high-heeled boots. She is so intent on telling the truth. She has lived by herself and run her estate for 10 years, all the while ruminating on life and duty. She can no longer be bound by hypocritical convention. The play is very modern and universal, set in a very restrictive time and place. We still grapple with these issues. Where does my duty lie? Mrs. Alving's mistakes have been huge. And yet, it seems, she has arrived at a very late point in her life to be addressing them."

The members of the *Ghosts* company have overlapping histories of working together. Some have worked with director Kent Paul before. Mace and Philip Goodwin, who plays Pastor Manders, have known each other for 25 years, but have never worked together. It is the nature of theater. Every new production expands your theater family.

Like her friend Lynn Redgrave, Mace has a bit of theater in her family background. She had an aunt who was the drama critic for the *Springfield Republican* for decades.

"She saved every one of her reviews. It was a time when many plays on their way to Broadway would start out of town, and she reviewed them all. Before I came to Buffalo, I searched to see if she had ever reviewed a production of *Ghosts*. I didn't find one. My parents are not great theater aficionados at all, but they read everything. When I told them I was playing this part they said, 'Tell us why this is a great play? Why do you want to do this?' I said, '*Ghosts* is specific and universal. Challenging and amusing. And Ibsen is funny.' People forget because the messages of the plays are so very serious, that along the way, Ibsen is very funny. I like him, and I love the woman I am playing."

## *GHOSTS* at STUDIO ARENA

The spine of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* is easy to articulate, as the compact drama leaps forward with each new revelation. Of course, it can be difficult to realize that a revelation has occurred, as the elusiveness in Ibsen's repressed world requires that shocking details are disclosed very discretely. Director Kent Paul has, for the most part, drawn a clear line for us to follow within the limitations of casting and rehearsal time in the current Studio Arena production, using a version of the text written by Robert Vivian.

Living in a rural Norwegian town in 1881, Mrs. Alving, the leading character, has learned to navigate an unspeakably repressive world. She has been so successful that no one even suspects the secrets she harbors. And these secrets are substantial, indeed.

To begin, her husband, the late Captain Alving, was not the stalwart pillar of the community that everyone seems to think he was. He was a broken man, a debauched alcoholic and libertine who fathered an illegitimate child with his wife's maid, contributed nothing to the operation of their estate, and who died of syphilis at a young age. To

protect her only child, Oswald, from his father's influence, Mrs. Alving sent the boy to be raised abroad at the age of seven.

Actress Cynthia Mace embodies Mrs. Alving with impressive authority and control. In her performance she clearly delineates the path that her character has walked and the goals she has set for her future. As Mrs. Alving's ability to hold on to her world begins to slip away, Ms. Mace grabs on tighter and tighter, only giving over to an unbridled outburst of emotion in the final moments when she realizes that all is lost. The performance is a model of restraint, followed by an artful progression to an emotional climax.

Mrs. Alving will realize, over the course of this one fateful evening, that all of the sacrifices she has made in the name of duty have been for naught. She cannot escape the ghosts of the past, or the ghosts of obsolete social attitudes either. Her son has inherited syphilis from his father and is dying. Further, the young man announces that he wants to marry Regina, his mother's maid, obliging Mrs. Alving to reveal that the girl is actually his half-sister. Finally, the concessions that Mrs.

Alving has made to her advisor, Pastor Manders, in the name of duty and propriety, turn out to be entirely misguided.

Plays like *Ghosts* were written at a time when acting companies, often under the direction of actor-managers, were inventing ensemble playing. It can be difficult to assemble a successful regional production in a short rehearsal time using actors who have not worked together often before. The performances supporting Ms. Mace are not entirely even, though Philip Goodwin is particularly strong as Pastor Manders. As a man who represents the repressive attitudes of society at large, but who is conflicted by a desire for power and his repressed sexual drives, Goodwin takes his character into boldly comic territory and into the throws of tragedy as well.

Each of the characters assembled around Mrs. Alving has a distinct agenda and relationship to her. As the play begins, Oswald, now a grown man, has returned home to unburden himself of a horrible secret. Mark Thornton's performance in the role, tentative at first, gains strength and clarity as the evening progresses.

Aimée Phelan-Deconinck's performance as Regina, the maid, seems to be several characters pieced together. Phelan-Deconinck has the gift of clear diction and fine technique, but she never quite delineates a consistent through-line for this woman. She masters the manipulative artifice, but never quite the genuine desire of the character to advance herself from her dead-end social situation.

John FitzGibbon gives an appealing comic performance as Regina's father, Jacob Engstrand, who hopes, somehow, to get the Alving fortune to set him up in business, and to lure his daughter in to help run it.

This is a visually beautiful production, with a lavishly realistic set designed by Jeffrey D. Schneider, meticulous period costumes by Ann R. Emo, evocatively lit by Phil Monat. The play, which was a historical landmark in the beginning of Modern realism, no longer plays quite realistically. With its heavily over-determined plot and use of symbolism, it might have benefited from a fresher, bolder interpretation. In any event, to see a great classic play given a strong production on the Studio Arena stage is a treat, indeed.



Photo Credit: Sean Graff

## JAMES CLOW is CAPTAIN HOOK

Earlier this year, when James Clow appeared in New York City as Captain Hook opposite Cathy Rigby, the *New York Times* gave him the sort of rave review every actor dreams of but few actually ever receive. The show "comes alive" when James Clow appears, said the *Times*. "So striking an impression does Mr. Clow make that he has only to show himself onstage before the audience begins to boo. With a disdainful glance, he replies, 'I haven't done anything yet.' But he has. He has invested this Peter Pan with...energy and spontaneity...."

"Yes," confirms Clow. "I try not to read reviews, but friends said I had to, and this one was so generous to me, I was, frankly, a little embarrassed." Clow will reprise his performance as Captain Hook when Cathy Rigby flies into Shea's Buffalo next week (Feb. 28-March 5).

Glenn Casale, who directed the production, enthuses over Clow's performance as well. "I love James. To begin, though he is a wonderful singer, he is an actor first, and that is what you need for a good Captain Hook! Inside that evil man, there is a spoiled little boy, and James understands that."

Clow feels especially happy to be performing the role opposite Cathy Rigby, who is one of the greatest Peter Pans of all time. "This is her farewell tour and I would really like to be playing Captain Hook for her very last performance, but frankly, there is no end in sight—they keep adding cities [to the tour]! And the praise she has received for this role is so well deserved. She is amazing!"

Of course the special magic of Peter Pan has always been its special appeal to children. Even the great Katharine Cornell recalled that her desire to be an actress began when, as a child, she saw Maude Adams play the role at Buffalo's Star Theatre.

"The kids are an amazing audience, and you have to be very truthful when you perform for them. I have a lot of leeway and opportunities to ad lib, which is fun. One of my favorite ad libs happened when an audience booed my entrance. I held up my hook and said, 'Booing the disabled? What bad form!' They laughed and then they were embarrassed. I got them! You see, I think Captain Hook is a great guy, and my favorite children of all are those deranged little kids who come dressed as Captain Hook! We have a special connection!"

**Peter Pan plays at Shea's Performing Arts Center for one week only.**