



POSTERITY

BY DOUG WRIGHT



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For Sarah Jane

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In October 1901, the Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland asked the famed playwright Henrik Ibsen to sit for a bust. Ibsen was seventy-three years old and had suffered a series of small strokes. Little is known about their meeting, except a few cursory accounts, such as this one by the poet Gunnar Heiberg:

Ibsen attacked Vigeland, saying it was unreasonable how long he had to sit there in the cold room, his health couldn't take it, and he certainly hadn't promised to sit for so many sessions. He coughed as he spoke. Vigeland muttered something, gave him an angry look, but didn't say a word ... Ibsen staggered, about to fall, and grabbed onto a chair. He looked like a wronged Jupiter.

—From *Gustav Vigeland and Henrik Ibsen*
by Tone Wikborg, translated by Sarah Cameron Sunde

The world premiere of POSTERITY was commissioned and presented by Atlantic Theater Company (Neil Pepe, Artistic Director; Jeffery Lawson, Managing Director) in New York City on February 25, 2015. It was directed by Doug Wright; the scenic design was by Derek McLane; the costume design was by Susan Hilferty; the lighting design was by David Lander; the original music and sound design was by David Van Tieghem; the research associate and dramaturg was Yoni Oppenheim; and the stage manager was Samantha Watson. The cast was as follows:

GUSTAV VIGELAND Hamish Linklater
HENRIK IBSEN John Noble
GRETA BERGSTROM..... Dale Soules
SOPHUS LARPENT..... Henry Stram
ANFINN BECK..... Mickey This

POSTERITY was developed with the support of Nashville Repertory Theatre through its Ingram New Works Fellowship.

POSTERITY was developed in part at the 2014 Sundance Institute Theatre Lab at the Sundance Resort.



CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

GUSTAV VIGELAND. A sculptor, 30s–40s. Ferociously driven and passionate about his work, sometimes at the expense of gentler niceties. Beneath his bravado lurks a crippling insecurity.

GRETA BERGSTRØM. A housemaid in her 70s. While she boasts a maternal streak, she has been alive for a great many years and doesn't suffer fools gladly.

ANFINN BECK. An apprentice in his early 20s, with charm and a winning grin. His youth, virility, and cockiness make him the immediate envy of men whose best years are already past.

SOPHUS LARPENT. A patron of the arts, 50s–60s. He's good-natured but occasionally officious, with a highly strung temperament and slight nervous condition.

HENRIK IBSEN. The great Norwegian playwright, in his 70s. Irrascible and contentious with a formidable intellect, surprising vain streak, and hidden reserves of compassion.

SETTING

1901. The capital city of Kristiania (now known as Oslo) in Norway.

The first three scenes of the play occur in the cavernous sculpture studio of Gustav Vigeland. It has chalky walls and skylights; drop-cloths cover the floor and the room is thick with plaster dust. On the walls, bank after bank of shelves. Sitting on them, an array of plaster studies for marble busts: august noblemen, monied dowagers, and various leading figures of the day. Some are serene; others have more animated expressions, sloping noses, or double chins. These disembodied heads, lined up side-by-side, seem to watch the action of the play like a silent, omnipresent jury.

In the rear wall, there's a huge sliding door made of wood and iron, like one might find on the side of a barn. It's slightly ajar, revealing a storage room upstage. In the room, we see a tantalizing glimpse of a gargantuan foot or extended hand, fragments of a

sculpture we can't wholly see. For anatomical research, a human skeleton hangs idly on a stand.

The last scene of the play unfolds in Henrik Ibsen's study, in his apartment at Arbins gate. It's a small blue room with yellow curtains and a hanging lamp. The walls are filled with pictures in gold frames: portraits, landscapes, and the occasional tintype. Looming over Ibsen's desk, Christian Krohg's famous painting of August Strindberg. Stage left stands a window, draped in yellow brocade. There is a door upstage center, leading into the private quarters of the apartment.

A NOTE ON THE ORIGINAL DESIGN

In Derek McLane's stunning design for the play's premiere at the Atlantic Theater Company, the sculpture studio remained present onstage throughout the play. Ibsen's study was indicated by a few key items: a rug; a chaise; a stove; a door unit; a window; a desk; and paintings on easels, which seemed to float in mid-air, suggesting walls. Even when the action of the play was occurring in Ibsen's apartment, we could still see the rough-hewn walls, dust, and staggering collection of haunting busts that constituted the key features of Vigeland's studio. This not only created visual unity for the world of the play, but it allowed us a thrilling coup de théâtre at the play's conclusion: The busts all blazed to life for an instant in pin spots, as we simultaneously illuminated Ibsen's defiant, haunted face. Metaphorically, he seemed to join the ranks of those carved before him. It was a highly effective gesture.

POSTERITY

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Working in clay at his stand, Gustav Vigeland. He wears a smock and a look of intense concentration.

Before him, two models, both nude. The first is Greta Bergström, a woman of about seventy. Her hair is in a bun; she crouches in profile, her legs drawn under her body.

She gazes with maternal concern at her partner, Anfinn Beck, a man some fifty years her junior. He sits next to her, his knees drawn up against his chest, his head angled away from her.

Their pose matches one of the many famous couplings which now stand in Frogner Park in Oslo; it's a disquieting marriage of figures, this robust young male and this frail, elderly woman. Gustav works in silence. There's a sudden knocking at the door.

GUSTAV. *(To his models.)* Don't move. *(Another round of knocks. Greta's face fills with panic.)* It's not him. He knows he's not to visit today. I told him so. Whoever it is, they'll go away. *(Emphatic pounding on the door, then silence. The room relaxes. Suddenly, a volley of steady, insistent knocks that doesn't stop. Gustav throws down his wooden knife in frustration.)* Damn it — ! *(The visitor gives the door a powerful shove and forces it open, tumbling into the room. His name is Sophus Larpent; he is a slight man with sharp features and a somewhat manic manner. He carries a satchel stuffed with papers.)*

LARPENT. What? Your studio is closed to me now?

GUSTAV. I asked you specifically — (*Larpent catches sight of the two models and is stunned into a moment of silence. Greta reaches down and pulls up the muslin drop-cloth draped at her feet and uses it to cover her bosom.*)

LARPENT. What the devil is this?

GUSTAV. You tell me. A mother, comforting her son in a moment of distress. Or a lover, seeking absolution for the ravages of time from her younger mate. Or no less than Mother Earth, offering sustenance to her favorite offspring, man. Take your pick, Larpent. (*But Larpent is oblivious, staring instead at the female model.*)

LARPENT. Good Lord. Mrs. Bergstrøm. (*To Gustav, a tortured whisper.*) She's my cleaning lady. (*With a heavy sigh, Greta rises, keeping the drop-cloth about her to cover her nakedness. With no place to hide, Anfinn places his hand decorously over his privates.*)

GUSTAV. I'm sorry, Greta. I told him, emphatically —

LARPENT. This is beyond the pale, Gustav, really. (*Under his breath.*) Now, each time I look at her, I'll have this image seared into my brain.

GUSTAV. (*Still to Greta.*) I promised you, swore to you, this wouldn't happen. (*To Larpent.*) She does this as a favor to me, in secret — and if you're a gentleman —

LARPENT. This hardly calls *my* honor into question.

GUSTAV. I sculpt from models; I always have.

LARPENT. She's not a model! She's Mrs. Bergstrøm! A woman her age!

GUSTAV. Please! She's in the room.

LARPENT. It's perverse.

GUSTAV. Rodin himself told me, "To any artist worthy of the name, all in nature is beautiful."

LARPENT. (*Tries to address Greta directly but can't do so without blushing.*) Dear Mrs. Bergstrøm, what madness compelled you — (*Turning away.*) It's useless. I can't even ... (*Stiffly.*) I've no choice but to dismiss you.

GUSTAV. *What?*

LARPENT. Every other day, this woman is in my home.

GUSTAV. (*To Greta.*) He's being impulsive; ignore him.

LARPENT. It's an open invitation to scandal.

GUSTAV. (*Still to Greta.*) I won't let it happen.

LARPENT. You've no say in the matter.

GUSTAV. Mrs. Bergstrøm, from now on, you may clean house for me.

LARPENT. Fine! Good! Now you're *stealing* her from me?

GRETA. Mr. Vigeland! Mr. Larpent. Might you permit me a moment to speak? (*Both men are momentarily cowed.*) Mr. Larpent, it's been a great privilege, an honor really, to serve you in your home these thirty years or so. I've a deep and abiding passion for laundry, and I've been so very fortunate that you produce it in such fulsome quantities. It's matched only by my fervor for dust, which you also keenly gratify. Then, of course, I've the happy bonus of polishing your silver and scraping your dinner plates. Yes, it's true, you gratify all my appetites, except of course my unfortunate dependency on food. I've tried to shed the habit with little or no success —

LARPENT. Are you suggesting that your wages aren't sufficient —

GRETA. Oh, for me, they are sufficient, quite sufficient, good for a meal a day, perhaps two. But, you see, I find the incriminating glances of my invalid husband and my poor, idiot child, grown in body but not in mind, a bit oppressive, and so — it's weakness, I'll admit — but I'm compelled to *share*. And so it's one bellyful split among three ...

LARPENT. I'm not made of money, Mrs. Bergstrøm; your services are the one indulgence, the one luxury —

GRETA. Still, circumstances force me to look elsewhere, in supplementary fashion.

LARPENT. For a few extra kroner, you'd sacrifice your decency?

GRETA. Decency's the prerogative of the rich, Mr. Larpent. I gave mine up long ago, when I first consented to scrub your bedpan. And while earning a day's wage is important, truly, it's not the only satisfaction.

LARPENT. Excuse me?

GRETA. Oh, to you, Mr. Larpent, with your untrained eye, my body must look as full of heartbreak and exhaustion as the life I've lived in it. But I was quite a beauty once. Mr. Vigeland's seen my every inch and tells me I'm fit for his art, an inspiration, even, the years be damned. That's a finer job description than the one you got to offer, sir. (*With that, she repairs behind a screen to get dressed. Anfinn can't help himself; he suppresses a giggle.*)

LARPENT. (*Turns to him.*) What's your excuse?

ANFINN. (*Nodding toward Gustav.*) His new apprentice; it's part of my job.

GUSTAV. Anfinn, meet Mr. Larpent.

ANFINN. How do you do?

LARPENT. Where on earth did he find you?

ANFINN. The Royal Drawing School, sir. If you'll pardon me ...
(*Breaks his pose and makes a grab for his leggings. He pulls them on.*)

LARPENT. (*To Gustav.*) I've never known you to take an interest in students.

GUSTAV. I don't. But then Professor Krohg offered me ten kroner a week if I'd tutor him. Besides, I need another strong back, to haul stone, mix plaster, and tend my clay.

LARPENT. (*To Anfinn.*) Oh, dear. It sounds like you've the lesser bargain.

ANFINN. I'm told it's quite an honor.

LARPENT. By whom?

ANFINN. Master Vigeland himself. Almost daily.

GUSTAV. It is! I said to the professor, "If I consent to take a pupil, you must give me your best; I can't afford to foul my studio with mediocrity." And so he sent young Mr. Beck. I've seen his oil sketches; the boy paints with a sure hand and a keen perspective. He's twice the draughtsman I was at his age.

ANFINN. (*With surprise.*) Why, thank you, sir.

GUSTAV. No false modesty; you know it's true.

ANFINN. Yes, but you've never said as much.

GUSTAV. Still, painting and sculpture are markedly different disciplines, aren't they? Just because you're proficient in one form doesn't mean you'll excel in another. (*To Larpent.*) We've yet to see if he can master a chisel as well as a brush, or a chunk of travertine as capably as a canvas. (*To Anfinn.*) You're either a budding genius or a colossal waste of my time.

LARPENT. For heaven's sake, show a little mercy.

GUSTAV. The same mercy you showed Mrs. Bergstrøm? (*At the mention of her name, Greta reappears from behind the screen, now in the humble attire of a proper housemaid.*)

GRETA. Beg pardon, sir, but are you quite certain you want to retain me?

GUSTAV. Excuse me?

GRETA. To clean for you. Meaning no disrespect, but you're an artist, yes? I fear my income, paltry as it is, might exceed your own.

GUSTAV. (*Still to Greta.*) It's the least I can do in the face of Mr. Larpent's lunacy.

LARPENT. *My lunacy?*

GRETA. What time should I report tomorrow?

GUSTAV. Mid-morning?

GRETA. Very good, sir, yes. (*Shoots a triumphant look at Larpent, who sinks inward, defeated.*)

GUSTAV. Anfinn, escort Mrs. Bergstrøm safely home. (*Feeling somewhat indebted to Larpent for his kindness, Anfinn turns to him by way of consolation.*)

ANFINN. It's odd for me, too. She used to keep me now and then, when I was a baby.

GRETA. You've nothing now that you didn't have then. (*They exit in the direction of the storage room.*)

LARPENT. For heaven's sake, *why?* The boy, yes, a strapping figure, but Mrs. Bergstrøm, in the twilight of her life —

GUSTAV. It's a brilliant pairing, because it's unexpected.

LARPENT. It's unexpected because it's of dubious taste!

GUSTAV. Gird yourself. It's just one set of figures among many that I'm proposing.

LARPENT. Proposing for what?

GUSTAV. A fountain.

LARPENT. A private commission, I hope, not a public one.

GUSTAV. For the town square, before Parliament House. At present, it's an eyesore; a patch of grass. Hardly befits a capital city! Norway deserves its own Place de la Concorde.

LARPENT. Kristiania is not Paris, and we are not French. (*Gustav retrieves a large scroll and unfurls it for Larpent's inspection.*)

GUSTAV. Picture it. Mammoth in scale, some fifty meters across. Rising from its center, an enormous bowl, cascading water, held aloft by six naked giants, five times the natural size, all of them raging against the sky. Around its rim, twenty or more statues in every conceivable circumstance, from chubby infancy to the bone-thin austerity of old age. Children riding atop their mothers like horsemen headed into battle; couples in the act of copulation, babies sprouting from them like the limbs of trees! The dying, their bodies bags of flesh, making the solemn march into oblivion. (*Pauses for a moment, pleased with himself.*) My crowning achievement, Larpent. My masterwork. To rival the tomb of Pope Julius, or even the Temple of Zeus. In this vast constellation of sculptures, I'll depict the whole of life.

LARPENT. But at what cost?

POSTERITY

by Doug Wright

4M, 1W

Norway's most celebrated sculptor, Gustav Vigeland, is commissioned to create the last official bust of its most famous writer — the irascible, imperious, and inscrutable Henrik Ibsen. The two artists, each needing something from the other, wage war over both the creation of Ibsen's likeness and the prospects of his legacy. With his inimitable wit and insight, Doug Wright explores the nature of artistic success and the fear of being forgotten.

“Very little is known about the 1901 encounters between Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland and famed playwright Henrik Ibsen, when the latter sat for a series of sessions to have his bust sculpted. But that hasn't stopped playwright Doug Wright, author of the Pulitzer- and Tony-winning I Am My Own Wife, from imagining what their interplay might have been. The writing is undeniably smart ... and the insightful dialogue illuminates both main characters.”

—**The Hollywood Reporter**

“Even after the lights fade, Wright's words will not. POSTERITY is likely to keep more than a few audience members up at night thinking about what they're leaving behind after they're gone.”

—**TheaterMania.com**

“As Doug Wright tells it in his masterful play POSTERITY ... all of us must make peace with our own lasting impact. ... A play that is so hell bent on resurrecting the careers of our idols does something else unintentionally. It reminds us of the rousing careers of some of our own living greats that we often take for granted. And Doug Wright is certainly one of them. He need not worry about tending to his own posterity. His work does so on its own.”

—**TribecaFilm.com**

Also by Doug Wright
I AM MY OWN WIFE
THE STONEWATER RAPTURE
WATBANALAND
and others

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