

# TUTA Theatre's fiery punk 'Hedda Gabler' really does end with a bang

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**By Ian Rigg**

After a century of staid productions and the lens of modern social mores, it can be difficult to believe **Henrik Ibsen's** work could ever be shocking. But sure enough, his premieres made audience members walk out.

Call TUTA Theatre's cool new adaptation *Hedda and the Angry Ibs*: in the spirit of Ibsen and punk rock musicals, this one-woman show is here to blow the doors off traditional theatre.



Director and adaptor **Jacqueline Stone** has a cohesive vision: she knows when to play it straight with a subtly subverted classical interpretation, and when to let the batshit loose. You don't need the protagonist's penchant to play with pistols to know some guns are gonna go off. Much criticism has been written over a century of whether or not *Hedda Gabler* is a feminist play, trying to examine the "scorpion in amber" of its main character, but Stone's take seems to be: if Hedda Gabler can't win the game, she'll sure as hell knock over the board.

What a beautiful board it is: scenic designer **Martin Andrew** furnishes an ambitiously long and lavish apartment with interesting protrusions over the audience's heads; that they're broken off and trailed with vines hints not only at a running fantasy, but at the crumbling façade to come. It's enriched by **Letitia Guillaud's** detailed and rustic props, **Tanya Tabler's** scrumptious floral styling, **Rachel Sypniewski's** curated and cool costume design (equal parts *My Fair Lady* and *My Chemical Romance*, and **Keith Parham's** evocative lighting design plunges the play into the inventive alternate dimension it dares to go.



For hidden behind a sensual curtain are the bombastic band of **Wain Parham, Eric Loughlin, and Amy Gorelow**. Iconoclastic composer **Wain Parham** plays with an eclectic punk pallet, conjuring rad tunes ranging from “Velvet Underground torch song” to “intelligent trash trashing a lounge” to “hellish and otherworldly nightmare”.

The band eerily looks on at an evocative ensemble made up of nebbish **Huy Nguyen**, high-society **Joan Merlo**, vulpine **Tom Dacey Carr**, and devoted **Aziza Macklin** – but of particular note is **Kevin V. Smith**, incinerating the stage with the seething passion and fury of a young **Willem Dafoe**, and a yearning hunger all his own.





But a play like *Hedda Gabler* hinges on its titular role – sure enough, one of the main reasons this adaptation works is because it’s anchored by its brilliant lead **Lauren Demerath**. In a unique approach that could be called “Norwegian Psycho”, her scintillatingly sinister Hedda is driven to seize whatever power she can: her malevolent machinations in a man’s world reflect a singular desire to shape a man’s destiny instead. The delightful and death-defying Demerath quickly makes the audience her accomplice as she crafts a complex character who is sociopathic but sincere, detached but visceral, petulant but mature, alien but adept, funny but fatal: and then she utterly nails the musical numbers that are worth the price of admission alone. It’s a bold, brave, and blistering performance that will leave audiences lacerated.

Whether they’ve been shrunk since 1891 or not, the social spheres of Hedda Gabler still exist; TUTA’s explosive production explores a woman who can be every bit as poised and poisonous as the world that keeps her caged. Is Hedda volatile because of the structural violence imposed on her from every angle, or is her fatal folly a weakness of her own capricious character? Audiences will spend a strong two hours wondering while they watch a woman who, even if she can’t write her own manuscript, can still shred it to pieces.