Although Henrik Ibsen is known as the foremost dramatist of Norway, it is doubtful whether he had any Norwegian blood in his veins. His great-great-grandfather, Peter Ibsen, was a Danish sea captain who settled at Bergen and married a German. Of the three succeeding Ibsens, one married a Scotch woman; two married Germans. Ibsen's father married the daughter of a wealthy German merchant. Nonetheless, Ibsen was always known to be intensely Norse in his writings and sympathies.

Ibsen’s tremendous impact on the course of western drama is considered second only to that of Shakespeare. The best of his plays portray the real-life problems of individuals through the genius he brings to the use of dialogue and symbols.

Ibsen was born on March 20, 1828, in Skien, Norway, a town of about 3,000. When Ibsen was eight, his father's business failed and shattered his family's hopes of properly preparing Ibsen for admission to medical school. Ibsen sailed from home at age fifteen to spend six years as a pharmacist's assistant in Grimstad, Norway, where he wrote his first play. In 1850 he moved to Christiania (Oslo), Norway, to continue to prepare for the examinations which would permit him to pursue a career in medicine. In 1851 he became assistant stage manager of a new theater in Bergen, Norway, where he was required to write one new play a year. His early plays, written in verse, were mostly unsuccessful. Nonetheless, Ibsen's time in Bergen gained him valuable theater experience.

Ibsen returned to Christiania in 1857, suffering through a period during which his plays failed or were rejected, causing him to fall into debt. He left Norway in 1864 and spent the next twenty-seven years in Italy and Germany. During this time he changed not only his appearance, but also his habits, and even his handwriting. Becoming distant and secretive, he seemed desperate to protect himself from the real and imagined hostility of others.

Responding to the demands of critics that literature should address current problems of the day, Ibsen developed a form in which social and philosophical matters could be addressed using stories about everyday life. While Ibsen did not invent the realistic or social reform play, he is credited with perfecting the form. As a result, most critics acclaim him as the most famous dramatist of the nineteenth century.

A man of intensely democratic ideas, Ibsen rebelled against the restraints of his bourgeois society. Although he was sometimes willing to behave, he refused to be required by society to do so. The pressure of public sentiment was another enemy that drew his ire. He felt that particular pressure was no less than tyranny.

Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891 as a literary hero. The man who left as a frustrated artist returned as an internationally known playwright. Although for much of his life Ibsen had lived an almost reclusive existence, he enjoyed the notoriety that the people in Christiania afforded him during his later years. Sadly, beginning in 1900 he suffered a number of strokes which left him partially paralyzed. He remained in Norway until his death in 1906.
TIMELINE OF IBSEN'S LIFE:

1828—Born on March 20th to Knud and Marichen Ibsen in the small Norwegian trading town of Skien.
1834—Ibsen’s father, once a prosperous merchant, falls into financial ruin. The shame and misery of his family’s circumstances eventually cause Henrik to leave Skien.
1844—Becomes an pharmacist’s assistant in the town of Grimstad, thought by many to be the port setting for Pillars of the Community.
1846—An illegitimate son, Hans Jacob, is born to Ibsen and maid Else Sophie Jensdatter Birkedalen, who is ten years his senior. Ibsen pays child support for over fifteen years, but reportedly meets Hans Jacob only once in 1892.
1851—Contracts with Bergen’s Norwegian Theater, and writes several early plays. For six years, Ibsen works with actors, stage-manages, and designs sets and costumes.
1852—Received a travel grant and went abroad for the first time. Sees his first performances of Shakespeare in Copenhagen and Dresden.
1857—Appointed artistic director, Norwegian Theater of Christiana (Oslo).
1858—Marries Suzanne Daae Thoresen.
1859—First son, Sigurd, born.
1864—Begins a twenty-seven-year period of self-imposed exile in Italy and Germany.
1880—A Doll’s House premières in Stockholm. Later productions in Christiana and Bergen receive controversial critical acclaim.
1891—Returns to Norway for a visit, but lives there for the rest of his life.
1890—Writs his final play, When We Dead Awaken, which marks his return to verse drama after more than thirty years of writing plays in prose.
1900—Suffers a stroke, which leaves the right side of his body partially paralyzed. A second stroke, the next year, renders him almost unable to walk.
1906—Dies on May 23rd at the age of 78. Fiery and defiant to the end, Ibsen’s last word is the Norwegian tvertimod (“to the contrary”).
1850—Catiline
1850—The Warrior’s Barrow (also known as The Burial Mound)
1851—Norma
1852—St. John’s Eve
1853—Lady Inger of Ostraat
1855—The Feast at Solhaug
1856—Olaf Liljekrans
1857—The Vikings at Helgeland
1862—Love’s Comedy
1863—The Pretenders
1866—Brand
1867—Peer Gynt
1869—The League of Youth
1873—Emperor and Galilean
1877—Pillars of the Community
1879—A Doll’s House
1881—Ghosts
1882—An Enemy of the People
1884—The Wild Duck
1886—Rosmersholm
1888—The Lady from the Sea
1890—Hedda Gabler
1892—The Master Builder
1894—Little Eyolf
1896—John Gabriel Borkman
1899—When We Dead Awaken
IBSEN AS THE FATHER OF REALISM

Ibsen is often considered as “The father of realism” because he rejected the melodrama and sentimentalism of nineteenth century drama, and was a leading pioneer in challenging the rules and expected behaviors of society in his plays. Ibsen portrayed humans as they truly are. He broke the barrier of actors reciting beautiful text, and instead showed a slice of realistic life and people, thus his “naturalist” approach. Ibsen said of his approach in writing Hedda Gabler- “My main goal has been to depict people, human moods and human fates, on the basis of certain predominant social conditions and perceptions.” His writing also focuses on social issues of the world he lived in. Through his plays, he criticized Victorian society for their hypocrisy, unequal treatment of women, and their deception in politics. He also overturned the assumed cornerstones and ideals of the society, such as the ideas that the community and marriages were always pure and noble, bringing to reality what was often a façade in Victorian society.

IBSEN AND GRIEG

There were many connections between these two brilliant Norwegians- one author, and one composer. Ibsen met Grieg for the first time at a Christmas party in Rome, in 1866. Ibsen took an immediate liking to Grieg, appreciating the composer’s talent for music as well as his intellectual views, many of which they held in common.

The two geniuses first collaborated on a setting of the play Peer Gynt to music, which acquired great acclaim for both of them. In fact, Grieg’s incidental music to Peer Gynt includes some of Grieg’s most famous pieces including In the Hall of the Mountain King and Morning Mood. Following their collaboration on Peer Gynt, Grieg went on to set six of Ibsen’s poems to music as well. In a similar way that Ibsen drew inspiration from Norwegian myths, Grieg pulled from Norwegian folk songs. Element’s production of Pillars of the Community will feature some of Grieg’s compositions.