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978-0-521-62377-3 - Strindberg and Modernist Theatre: Post-Inferno Drama on the Stage

Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker

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STRINDBERG AND MODERNIST THEATRE

Despite the profound influence exerted by August Strindberg on the development of modernist theatre and drama, the myth has persisted that his plays – particularly such later works as *A Dream Play*, *To Damascus*, and *The Ghost Sonata* – are somehow “unperformable.” Nothing could be farther from the truth, as this book sets out to demonstrate by providing, for the first time in English, a detailed performance analysis of the major works created after the psychic upheaval Strindberg called his Inferno. Ranging from the early productions of Max Reinhardt and Olof Molander to the reinterpretations of Robert Lepage, Robert Wilson, and Ingmar Bergman in our own day, this study explores the crucial impact that this writer’s allusive (and elusive) method of playwriting has had on the changing nature of the theatrical experience. Each chapter ends with a section devoted to innovative Strindberg performances on the contemporary stage.

As a team, the authors have published a wide range of books that include *A History of Scandinavian Theatre* (1996), *Ingmar Bergman: a Life in the Theatre* (1992), *Ibsen’s Lively Art* (1989), *Ingmar Bergman: Four Decades in the Theatre* (1982), *Edward Gordon Craig and “The Pretenders”* (1981), and others. Frederick Marker’s other books include studies of Hans Andersen, Kjeld Abell, and several editions and translations. Lise-Lone Marker is the author of *David Belasco: Naturalism in the American Theatre* and many articles and chapters on subjects ranging from Elizabethan acting to Swedish cinema.

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PREFACE

The formative influence of August Strindberg on the development of both modern drama and modern theatre holds the status of a critical truism that no one familiar with the subject would presumably dispute. Yet, paradoxically, one of the sturdiest myths that has attached itself to Strindberg's work, both in his own time and in ours, has been the notion that his plays – particularly the great experimental masterpieces of his post-Inferno period – are somehow “unperformable.” Although Strindberg scholarship has flourished in recent years, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the critical analysis of his plays in performance and the consequent relationship between dramaturgy and *mise-en-scène*. One of the more useful efforts to restore a more balanced understanding of Strindberg's inherent theatricality was made in the monograph on *Miss Julie* and its performance “transcriptions” published some years ago by Egil Törnqvist and Barry Jacobs. Until now, however, no detailed performance study of Strindberg's major post-Inferno works – by which we chiefly mean *A Dream Play*, *To Damascus*, and *The Ghost Sonata* – has been available in English, despite the compelling impact these plays can be said to have had on modernist and postmodernist theatre and theatrical theory. Hence, the present study represents an attempt to fill that gap and, in the process, to dispel the myth of unperformability that has fostered it.

At the heart of the issue is the crucial effect that this writer's allusive (and elusive) method has had on the changing nature of the theatrical experience and the spectator's relationship to it. In spite of the undeniable difficulties they present and the innovative thinking they demand in production, the three plays with which this study is mainly preoccupied have never lost their grip on the imaginations of directors, actors, and designers. Our approach is necessarily selective, however, drawing on representative examples of conceptually significant (or occasionally wrongheaded) interpretations that translate the words on Strindberg's

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page into the visual and verbal language of the living theatre. In this respect, we feel it is important to give the reader the opportunity to become a kind of spectator, and this is why we have often chosen to furnish more detailed and faceted accounts of a few productions of a particular play, rather than attempting to provide (even if we had been able to compile one) a laundry list of all of its major and recent productions. For reasons that should be obvious, we have not sought to achieve any such inclusive coverage.

Nor has the polemical distinction that is sometimes insisted on between the productions of the so-called establishment theatre and those of the fringe seemed to us to have any relevance to our argument. Susan Einhorn's staging of *A Dream Play* at the Open Space in New York in 1981 was an interesting, provocative conceptualization achieved in a small experimental theatre. But so was Max Reinhardt's 1916 staging of *The Ghost Sonata* at his Kammerspiele in Berlin. And so, too, was Ingmar Bergman's revisitation of the *Sonata* last year in Dramaten's chamber theatre. In the end, the significance of all these productions lies in the light each sheds on the text and the choices each makes in order to bring that text to life for a contemporary audience. While we offer no apology for the prominence inevitably accorded the interpretations of Reinhardt, Bergman, and Olof Molander, the three foremost directors of Strindberg's later plays during the past century, our field of inquiry has nonetheless been wide and ranges from early approaches to the post-Inferno work by Per Lindberg, Evgeny Vakhtangov, and the German expressionists to contemporary reinterpretations by Robert Lepage and Robert Wilson.

The work of other scholars has provided us with an important stimulus. The significance of the line of discussion opened up more than twenty years ago by Richard Bark's Swedish dissertation on the dramaturgical and theatrical implications of Strindberg's "dream-play technique" has not diminished, and the direction we have taken in our own research on Strindberg in performance reflects the positive example set by Bark's pioneering study. Similarly constructive has been the influence exerted by other prominent Scandinavian critics in this area, among them Kela Kvam (in her work on Reinhardt and Strindberg) and Gunnar Ollén (in his concise, commented performance calendars for each of Strindberg's plays). It is to Ollén's work and the supplementary production listings that have been published each year by Strindbergssällskapet (The Strindberg Society) that the reader in search of performance calendars for Strindberg's plays must turn.

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Anyone writing about Strindberg in English is virtually bound to feel indebtedness both to the criticism and the translations of Michael Robinson, Evert Sprinchorn, Harry Carlson, and Michael Meyer. We are no exceptions in our admiration for their respective contributions. In particular, the scrupulous Robinson edition of the playwright's letters has made the task of scholars or students working only in English immeasurably more rewarding.

In practical terms, our research in primary sources has been greatly aided by the cooperation of a wide range of institutions and archives, a number of which are named in the list of illustrations or in the notes. Among these, we owe a singular debt of gratitude to the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm – known to its friends and admirers the world over as Dramaten – where Ann-Christine Jernberg, Dag Kronman, and many others have responded to our requests for sources and yet more sources with unfailing forbearance – and tangible results. On the editorial side, we again have the opportunity to express our warm appreciation to Dr. Victoria L. Cooper of Cambridge University Press for her continued help and encouragement. Not least, we are deeply grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for research grants awarded in support of this study.